Mass Effect: Labyrinth

by Pigeon_theoneandonly

Summary

Nathaly Shepard wasn't prepared to die. But some fates are worse than death. When her greatest enemy claims she's their only hope to defeat an impossible threat to humanity, she has no choice but to fight. But how is she supposed to contend with a foe that rivals even Sovereign's destruction when she's lost two years of her life and everything she held dear?

As she struggles to reconcile working for Cerberus and find her new place in the galaxy, others will try to make her a pawn. Spectres have always risked losing everything, but this time, it might be too much to ask.

Meanwhile, back in the Alliance, Kaidan Alenko uncovers a secret with dire implications for the past and future- one which will inevitably bring him into a confrontation with the woman he's mourned for two years, and threaten to tear them apart forever.

A re-imagined and canon-divergent Mass Effect 2, that keeps to the spirit of the original while exploring the true costs of resurrection, and how Kaidan Alenko became a spectre.
September 2183

“We’re here,” Private Morris said. The Mako ground to a halt and powered down.

Kaidan Alenko stepped out into the sloppy Chasca mud. Rain sheeted down, drenching him instantly and trickling between the layers of his hard suit. The helmet would have kept him warm and dry, but ever since he spent a month all but trapped in his suit awaiting rescue on Alchera’s frozen surface, he didn’t care for it.

The marine detachment from the SSV Agincourt had set up camp beside one of the old colonial
labs. Like a number of small Traverse colonies, Chasca’s settlers were all but eradicated during the war with the geth. Any colonists left had long since scattered into the wilderness. All they found were piles of ash bearing chemical traces linking them to husks, and dragon’s teeth devices for creating them.

They were the last Mako to arrive from the L.Z. The commander sauntered over to him.

“Lieutenant Alenko. Good of you to join us.”

Commander Thorne was a cocky officer, middle-aged, a half-head shorter than Alenko and the kind of person who took reticence as a personal slight. Thorne hadn’t approved of his transfer; he was quite open about his opinion that the Agincourt had no need of the Normandy’s “wash-outs”. In other circumstances, it might have bothered Alenko, but as it was he had no energy for ship drama. “Any sign of our prisoner yet?”

Thorne’s scowl deepened. “No. We’ve got him though. It’s just a matter of time.”

During a routine transfer of high-value prisoners from an Alliance outpost back to Arcturus, one of the detainees, a researcher, commandeered a shuttle and fled to the Maroon Sea. The Agincourt patrolled this sector and was called in to deal with the situation. They’d tracked him here, to Chasca. It made sense. There was evidence Chasca had dealings with Cerberus prior to the geth invasion.

Since then, the escaped scientist had led them on a wild goose chase all over the narrow habitable zone that straddled the tidally-locked planet’s scorched day side and frozen night side. The stationary sun would be an excellent navigation point, if they ever saw it. The clash of climates created almost constant rain. Mildew had begun to grow in the corners of the Mako ports and under the ceramic armor of their suits.

Alenko doubted they’d find the prisoner. It was a levo-amino planet flush with plant life. If the man was smart, he could hide here for years. But Alenko didn’t really care about that, either. There wasn’t much he did care about these days. “As you say, sir.”

Thorne narrowed his eyes, as if looking for the insult. Before he could reply, Private Morris came around and saluted. “All squads present and accounted for, sir. Scans are clean. This station’s empty.”

“Check for supplies, and any signs that our Dr. Farrell passed through. He came here for a reason. I doubt it was to count the trees.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Thorne spared Alenko one final contemptuous glare. “Get your rations. I’m sending your squad to scout at 1300.”

“Yes, sir,” he answered automatically, without inflection.

The commander made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat, and sauntered off. Alenko wiped the water off his face, a gesture of futility if there ever was one, and tried to concentrate on finding the supply officer instead of the fact that Nathaly Shepard was three months dead this morning.

It was impossible to know the date exactly. The chance that she’d survived the explosion, all alone, running out of air, possibly injured, possibly in pain, haunted him in the hours when there wasn’t enough work to push it away. He dreamed about it sometimes, searching through wreckage that sparkled coldly in the sun, or choking on smoke as he scoured the burning decks of the
Normandy, following her voice. But the day the ship went down was close enough.

Three months. One minute it would feel like an eternity, and the next it would be like he just spoke with her, just saw her face. Alenko proceeded with the Agincourt transfer because he wanted to get back to work. He pushed to be returned to active duty as soon as the navy would allow it, needed something other than far too much thinking to fill the time— but it turned out he’d have to go a lot farther than the Traverse if he wanted to leave her behind.

He took his field rations and found a quiet rock to eat. Though he tried to peel back as little of the foil cover as possible, water inevitably got mixed into the food, turning his mashed potatoes to soup. Alenko was rarely hungry now. Military food was never renowned for its culinary excellence, but good or bad, fresh or fouled, none of it had any flavor.

The potatoes stuck to his tongue like paste. He ate the peas one at a time, methodic.

Private Morris found him there before he was more than halfway through. Morris was a bit more sensitive than their C.O. Everyone knew Alenko had survived the Normandy attack, and most of the Agincourt marines assumed he never recovered from it. Alenko let them. It wasn’t like explaining that he’d been in love with his late commanding officer, that he left her aboard their ship to die, would improve his standing, even if he’d felt inclined to talk about it.

Unlike most of the others, Morris seemed not to care if Alenko failed to uphold the unspoken marine code to either put up a good front or get out. “Sir, the C.O. wants to know why we’re still here.”

Alenko glanced at his omni-tool and was surprised to see it was time. Lately the clock seemed to get away from him more and more. One hour blurred into the next. “Is Nguyen ready to go?”

“She’s waiting at the far end of the lab. Thorne wants us scouting south.”

“Understood.” Alenko got to his feet, rubbed a crick out of his neck, and did a cursory check of his weapons. The uneaten food lay where he left it.

Corporal Nguyen already had her rifle in her hands and trained on the forest just beyond the lab, eager to begin. She was the tiniest marine he’d ever seen, but also one of the most bloodthirsty people he’d ever met. She lived for the fight. Scuttlebutt had it that she’d been big in the local boxing scene on her home colony and Alenko had no trouble believing it. The woman was corded iron.

“Are we leaving?” she asked lightly, dark eyes gleaming. The ongoing downpour plastered straggles of hair to her forehead.

“We’re to patrol south looking for any signs of Farrell.” Alenko drew his rifle.

Morris offered an alternative. “If we head slightly west, we’ll be walking between this lab station and the next. It’s a logical route for him to take.”

“Good.” Alenko gestured forward. “Move out.”

It was a bit drier under the leaves. The dense foliage slowed the course of the rain, and the sound of the drops sliding off the canopy was somewhat soothing. There was little animal life aside from a few birds cawing in the branches. It must exist, to sustain this sort of ecosystem, but evidently the animals didn’t like the rain any more than the human trespassers. Alenko took the opportunity to wipe the rainwater out of his eyes.
Nguyen walked several paces ahead, sweeping her rifle over her field of view. Her prosthetic arm, a fully articulated cybernetic masterpiece, had been dulled to the drab colors of the woods, seamless with her suit. God knew how she convinced the navy to let her keep it. SOP mandated recruits have their limbs regrown—sheer intimidation, probably.

The pigmentation, however, was new technology. The latest-issue Alliance hardsuits they all wore incorporated the same photonic crystal-based camouflage. Without diverting from her task, she said, “The patrol Thorne sent out this way when we arrived hasn’t come back yet.”

Alenko ground his teeth. Thorne hadn’t bothered to mention that. “Probably slowed down by all this mud.” They were each coated to the knee with the sticky stuff, thick as tar. But as much as he wanted to maintain calm, he didn’t truly believe that was why they were late. “We should be careful.”

Morris kept up the optimism. “Maybe we’ll run into them.”

“Look.” Nguyen pointed at the ground with a too-sharp mechanical finger. “Here, under this tree.”

Alenko knelt beside the footprint. Its pattern was protected by the thick roots. “This isn’t from a military boot.”

Hard suit boots had a distinct shape and tread. This looked more like a sneaker. And the colonists left Chasca months ago.

Morris peered at it. “Looks like Nguyen was right. Bastard ran this way.”

“He can’t be far ahead, not if this footprint’s still here in this wet.”

Nguyen’s eyes were fixed on the shadows between the trees. “We still haven’t seen any sign of the other squad.”

Morris shrugged. “A single unarmed scientist who hasn’t eaten in days, against three marines?”

Alenko didn’t know what Farrell had or hadn’t found to eat. Surely some of the colonists’ stores were durable, and if Cerberus agents used this colony as a base, god only knew what kinds of dangerous technologies or substances the man might have commandeered. Alenko had a look at through the Cerberus labs on Nepheron after Nathaly took the whole base prisoner five months back. There were things inside he wished he’d never seen.

“I don’t like this,” he said aloud, straightening and raising his rifle slightly, to make it easier to aim quickly. His other hand he kept free. Alenko never had the stamina to hold a readied biotic attack for very long, but he compensated by being able to gather the energy rapidly. “I’ll take point. Morris, watch our six.”

“Yes, sir.” Morris fell back. Nguyen took up station between them. Alenko proceeded slowly, taking in every sound, every flicker of motion in the forest around them. He welcomed it. Right now there was no room for anything else in his head. It was a rare occasion these last three months that he ever felt like himself, at home in his own skin.

Morris swung his gun wildly. “What was that?”

“A branch falling.” Nguyen was amused. “Deadfall.”

“Quiet.” Alenko moved forward, each step landing softly in the mud. Something about this didn’t feel right. It was almost too still. Even the birds had fallen silent. There was something in these
woods they didn’t like.

He stepped on something that wasn’t wet earth, and wasn’t a tree root. “What-“

The rope caught the toe of his boot as it flew through the air and knocked him off his feet. He stared up at the dancing line. A few centimeters closer, his ankle would have been snagged and he’d be dangling five meters in the air.

There was a second cry and the sound of a tree whipping upward with some speed. He twisted around just in time to see Morris disappear into the canopy. In distance, someone laughed. It was not a friendly sound. “Nguyen.”

“Sir,” she said, coming to his side with her weapon raised.

He retrieved his rifle from where it fell. “Where is Private Morris?”

“Here,” came the private’s voice. He bobbed down, still held by the bouncing tree, a bruise blossoming on his face and a look of chagrin beneath it.

Alenko sighed. “Cut him down-“

The forest erupted in fire. All around them, whole strips of terrain exploded out of the earth, sending fountains of sparks and mud high into the air with a sound like thunder. The air choked with their smoke. Alenko threw up a barrier before he could form a coherent thought- bone-deep training reacting faster than his brain. Nguyen plastered her back to a tree. Morris, unable to escape, let out another yell and tried to shield his head with his arms.

Alenko directed a biotic throw into the loose soil and managed to disrupt the charges, flinging them away from his squad. They corkscrewed into the woods shedding flame. He thought he spied a figure through the smoke. Alenko sent three shots after him, certain they all missed.

Nguyen took a breath and darted for Morris’ position. The private was a sitting duck. He watched her sling her rifle over her back and shimmy up the tree like a spider. He covered them from the ground, continuing to search for the person he’d seen. It had to be Dr. Farrell. Nothing else made any sense.

A sniper’s shot chewed into the tree beside him. He doubled the strength of his barrier and returned fire, blindly. Nathaly had this trick she could do, sighting accurately on sound alone, like the report of a gun, but Alenko was nowhere near as good a shot. “Come out here! Show yourself!”

Morris fell in a heap beside him. Nguyen followed, landing lightly in a crouch, her eyes already scanning the trees. Her fingers, fused into a blade to cut Morris’ snare, flexed and separated. “We need to move.”

“Retreat?” Morris gasped.

Alenko’s hand slashed through the air, negating. “No. We find this bastard.”

The two enlisted marines exchanged a glance. Morris grimaced. Nguyen offered him a feral smile.

He looked out into the woods. “This is a show meant to scare us.”

“Is that what snipers do?” Nguyen asked sweetly. “Scare people?”
“Get moving.” Alenko stepped over the depleted charges and moved into the smoke. It was thin enough to breathe easily now but still limited visibility. The squad crowded close.

Another shot smacked into Alenko’s barrier and caused him to falter in his step. He lost his grip on the dark energy field. Nguyen turned and fired back. There was more laughter.

Morris was sweating. “Sir, we really ought to get some backup—“

“He’ll be gone by then.” Alenko stomped toward the sound. “What do you think he did to that other patrol?”

“He must have found equipment in one of the other lab stations.” Nguyen kept pace with him easily, her eyes alight. “There’s another not far from here.”

“That’s where he’s leading us.” Alenko was certain of it. He started to jog.

They fought their way forward, if exchanging potshots could be called fighting. The pillbox hab soon emerged from the forest, smaller than the others the Agincourt marines had visited since starting this chase- more like an outpost. The door was locked tight.

“Keep your guard up,” Alenko said, as he hacked the electronic lock and the hatch slid up into the depths of the wall.

The stepped into a dark hallway, dripping water and wiping the rain off their faces for the first time in hours. Nguyen and Morris clicked on the flashlights mounted to their guns.

Alenko did the same. “If he trapped the woods, he probably trapped this place too.”

“At least it won’t be snares,” Morris said dryly, rubbing his ankle with his foot.

Alenko pointed. “Look. Mud.”

“Farrell,” Nguyen spat. It wasn’t a question. It was the same sneaker print from outside.

They followed the faint trail into the lab until they came to a hallway where the floor was slick with fluid. Alenko sniffed the air but could detect nothing foul. There were no leaks in the ceiling or the walls; no natural reason for the floor to be this wet, regardless of the weather outside, even if Farrell passed this way. What did it mean? What danger did it pose?

The uncertainty that had plagued his decisions since the Normandy crash grew and grew, until he could bear it no longer.

“To hell with it,” he muttered, and splashed through the corridor, his squad at his heels.

So naturally, as soon as they reached the midpoint, the liquid ignited.

There must have been fumes of some kind, undetectable to the human nose, because it rose up around them in a cloud. Yelling and cursing, they each fled for the nearest point that was not on fire. Alenko reached safety and beat the last of it off his boots. The suit had protected him from the worst of it but his face was singed and all over he was uncomfortably overheated. The suit webbing where it attached to his boots seemed half-melted, though the fire wasn’t nearly that hot. Acid? Was acid flammable?

Morris was with him. Nguyen was not. He called through the fire. “Corporal, report!”

There was no reply. He tried again. “Corporal Nguyen!”
Alenko’s eyes darted between the flames, straining to see something. A hunched figure, shadowed by the fire, hurried towards the blaze and bent to retrieve something on the floor. There was a dragging sound. Alenko took a half-step towards the fire. “Farrell!”

The figure paused and gave a low chuckle. “Leaving so soon?”

Alenko was moving before he’d even made a conscious decision to go. Morris yelled after him. “Lieutenant! Sir!”

He shielded his face with his arm and prayed his suit was as good as Hahne-Kedar claimed. Biotic barriers were useless against heat and corrosion. Ten long steps and he was out the other side, the soles of his boots squishy and too hot.

The figure disappeared through a hatch down the hall. Alenko hit the ground at a dead run and skidded through the door. Small patches of flame flickered over his boots and calves.

The second he entered the doctor flung a rack of glass test tubes at his face. Alenko batted it aside and it shattered where it struck the wall. He got off one shot before he noticed Nguyen slung over Farrell’s shoulder, her wet hair hanging down towards the floor. She seemed unconscious. Alenko cursed.

Farrell was already fleeing through another hatch. He couldn’t move fast under his load, but Alenko couldn’t get a clean shot. Damning his energy reserves, Alenko let go the barrier, prepared a biotic attack, and chased after.

As soon as he hit the next room, he flung it through the air and sent the doctor crashing over a table, knocking several instruments to the floor and dropping Nguyen. Farrell’s sneakers scrabbled on the broken glass and he half ran, half crawled to a counter, dragging the corporal with him. Alenko charged his position. Farrell popped up over the countertop and let off six rounds in rapid succession.

Three hit. They brought down his shield and left a good pockmark in his ceramic suit plating. Alenko was forced to spend his energy replacing his barrier.

Farrell got to his feet, dragging Nguyen upright between them and aimed the pistol at her head. Alenko recognized it as Alliance-issue, probably Nguyen’s. The woman groaned against the counter as she started to awaken. She was scorched in places, skin turned red from getting caught in the blaze.

Alenko held his aim but did not fire. Farrell’s smile widened. He spoke in a measured London accent, each syllable crisp. “Game over, Lieutenant.”

“I don’t think so.” He took a step to the right, careful, evaluating his options. Nathaly would take the shot. Then, ruefully, but Nathaly could actually manage a tough shot like that and make it a sure thing. “You alright, Corporal?”

“Still here, sir,” Nguyen slurred.

“Quiet,” Farrell instructed, glancing down. His gaze flicked back to Alenko. “You Alliance are soft. Too soft. You could have me now if you were willing to let the grunts die. That’s their purpose, after all.”

“I don’t need a lecture on morality from a Cerberus operative.” His eyes narrowed. “I’ve never seen anyone treat an animal like you treated some of your victims on Nepheron.”
Farrell tilted his head, caught by surprise. “Nepheron- I thought you looked familiar. Wait…” Now he truly was grinning, ear to ear. “You were the officer with the busted leg, following that bitch commander around. Well, well.”

Alenko raised his gun a little higher. “Call Shepard that again and you’ll regret it.”

“Will I?” He tapped the barrel against Nguyen’s skull to make a point. Beneath her hair, she glared sullenly at Alenko, the last traces of Farrell’s drug gone. He saw her give the slightest of nods.

He moved one hand behind his hip, casually, as he adjusted his stance. Farrell was too caught up in his complaints to notice. “It’s absolutely odious to be kept prisoner by the very people you’re trying to help. The Alliance only gets in the way. With Cerberus, I served humanity more than you ever-“

The energy gathering in his fist reached critical mass. As his arm swung up, Nguyen simultaneously drove her elbow into Farrell’s stomach and pivoted on her heel. The fingers of her prosthetic sealed together into a hard, sharp point and drove into his side.

He dropped the weapon with a rough gasp, clutching the wound. Alenko’s lift caught him and set him spinning in mid-air.

Nguyen stumbled clear, wiping at her mouth. Blood dripped from her hand to the floor. “He just doesn’t know when to quit.”

Alenko moved in, keeping his rifle trained on the scientist, who groaned as he tried to staunch his bleeding. He kicked away Farrell’s dropped weapon. To Nguyen, he asked, “How’d he get you?”

“Rag over my mouth, while I was still stunned from the flames.” She spat. “Wet. Tasted foul. Guess it wasn’t strong enough.”

“Go vomit anyway.” Throwing up could worsen certain poisons, but with no clue what it was and little chance of finding out quickly, it was worth the risk. Plenty of inhalants were never meant to be swallowed.

She nodded and headed for a lab sink. Alenko called in to camp, relaying the situation in a few short words.

As Nguyen retched, Dr. Farrell managed a choked laugh, revolving slowly in place. There couldn’t be much time left on the field. “I’m surprised to see you here alone, Lieutenant. I didn’t realize you had an ounce of autonomy in you.”

Now that Alenko could see him properly, it was clear life on the run had not been kind of Farrell. He had a gaunt look, as if he hadn’t found much to eat here, his eyes even more rat-like in his thin face. What hair he had left was in wild disarray and his face was pale. But Nguyen’s stab seemed to have left only superficial damage, based on his lucidity, though its stain continued to spread darkly across his tunic.

Alenko’s radio activated, relaying orders to sit tight and wait for backup. He acknowledged, absentely stomping to pat out the last of the fire still clinging to him. At the sink, Nguyen shot him a glance, and half-groaned, “We just gonna let him bleed out? After all that?”

Farrell fell heavily to the floor as the mass effect field gave way. Alenko’s gun followed him all the way down, walking carefully around the lab bench to keep him in sight. “No.”
He fished through a pouch one-handed, and tossed him a tube of medi-gel. It landed a few inches from Farrell.

The doctor groused. “What, I have to do it myself?”

“You’re not bleeding that fast,” Alenko replied, stoically. “The coagulant will set in before it gets bad.”

Farrell muttered and picked up the tube, fumbling at the cap. “So decisive. It’s like seeing a trick dog off the leash—”

“I was following Shepard to keep her from strangling you lot with her own two hands,” he said, thoroughly irritated, and not liking the reminder.

“Ah, yes. I was concerned about that myself. Kept my head down, out of her sight.” Farrell flashed a smile, showing teeth. “Shepard was always prone to… hasty actions.”

“A kindness I am regretting now.” He watched as Farrell took a breath, removed his hand, and hissed as the medi-gel squirted into the wound, oddly devoid of empathy though every marine was familiar with that particular sting.

It was more than what Farrell was saying. Nepheron had come on the heels of Virmire. Nathaly was in a terrible place. He’d tried to talk to her for days and she wouldn’t even hear him out. She was too distraught to listen to anything but the nagging of her own guilt. She’d gone to Nepheron because she wanted to kill something that deserved to die, and Cerberus made an excellent target.

He was too injured to accompany her on that mission. So he wasn’t there when she confronted Wayne; wasn’t there when she learned the terrible truth of what happened to her at Akuze. But he’d been on the ground later, while they waited for a Fifth Fleet patrol to take over the situation, and held her afterwards in the shuttle bay. It was the only time he’d ever seen her close to breaking.

Nguyen lifted her head from the sink at last, and took a few deep breaths. “Where the hell are our marines?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” He smiled.

Nguyen retrieved her pistol from the floor, her every slight move a threat, and trained it on him. “That’s exactly why I asked.”

Again the laugh. “My wits may be addled by my prolonged confinement amongst such imbeciles, but not quite dulled enough to give up my last ticket out of here. I want a shuttle, fully stocked, and when I’m in orbit I’ll send their location.”

“Coming right up.” Alenko couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice. “You’re not my problem much longer, anyway.”

“You were there,” he growled, sitting up on his knees with a wince of pain, spitting the words like a curse. “Shepard interrupted our beautiful work. She had no conception of what she was destroying.”

Alenko shot him a dark look, but didn’t offer a reply. Maybe Farrell would run out of complaints.

The hatch opened. Morris stepped inside. “Sir—”
“How’d you get here?” Alenko was grateful for the interruption.

“Flames burned out. Our backup should be here soon.”

“I’ve got it in hand.”

“Yes.” Farrell raised his hand in an expansive gesture of welcome. “We were having a nice chat about old times.”

Alenko raised his rifle, just enough to make his point. “Stop moving and shut up, or so help me I will make you shut up.”

Morris glanced at him, startled. Alenko ground his teeth and tried to reel in his temper.

“Try to imagine my position.” Farrell gestured. “My life’s work—gone! All because some navy cunt was too thick-headed—”

“I told you to leave her out of this. I won’t ask again.” He meant to ignore the jabs. He really did. But all he could see was her standing in the battery, beating back the flames while the ship went to pieces around them.

“Or you’ll what? Offer more empty threats? Maybe use one of your fancy biotic tricks?” Dr. Farrell chuckled. “Harm me, and you’ll never get the other marines back.”

“Hey, L.T.” Morris laid a hand on his arm. “Maybe bring it down a notch.”

Nguyen was nervous, and nervous made her angry. “Can we stop talking? Nobody cares how much fricking research Shepard burned at some Cerberus lab.”

Suddenly, Alenko’s expression grew quite shrewd. He stared at Farrell. “That’s it, isn’t. Cerberus wasn’t going to bust any of Nepheron’s researchers out of a navy brig, not after you lost an entire base in one go. You came here looking for something they’d want badly enough to take you back in the bargain.”

The doctor looked up at him with true revulsion. “I heard Shepard died.”

_She screamed at him to leave as fire consumed the ship. He came to make certain she stay behind, but his resolve disintegrated in the face of that sudden barrage, her ironclad tone of command that stopped charging krogan in their tracks, as she ordered him to go._

_He left her standing in the battery and never saw her again._

“Her ship was attacked by geth,” Nguyen said, disdainful. “Everyone knows that.”

Farrell kept his attention on Alenko. As if he read exactly the effect the invocation had on him. “How did it happen, Lieutenant? We’re all curious about the details. Surely you were there.”

Alenko swallowed. He’d never know how exactly Nathaly died. It had haunted him all these months, the question that wouldn’t go away, the one that wouldn’t allow him any peace. The slight motion of his throat didn’t escape Farrell’s notice.

“I hope it was slow,” Farrell said, drawing out the words. “I hope she survived the attack and it was suffocation that got her.”

_Sitting on the surface of Alchera, staring up at the dark canopy of storm clouds and wondering if she was still alive, in pain or just cold and alone. Waiting for him to come get her, knowing rescue_
was impossible. Carbon CO2 scrubbers wearing out like a ticking clock with every breath.

Alenko’s mouth had gone dry. “I’ve asked you twice now to be quiet.”

Farrell looked up at Alenko, his eyes glittering with triumph. “I hope she waited up there, among the dead, running out of air, and had a good, long time to think about what was coming. Just like I did when she made us crouch in the dirt for two days.”

Alenko ran a sandpaper tongue over his lips. Joker nudging through the wreckage in their slapped-together shuttle. Fearing with every piece that they’d find her frozen, broken body lurking behind it. Almost more afraid they wouldn’t.

Nguyen and Morris’ nervousness hung palpable in the air. Alenko tried to remember himself. Cleared his throat. Wet his lips again, as best he could. “You’re going back into Alliance custody. I don’t need to answer any of this.”

“Do you know what happens, Lieutenant, when the body begins to want for oxygen?”

When he made no reply, Farrell continued, “It feels like your lungs are coming apart. The throat goes dry. The eyes bulge. I’ve heard it’s quite painful, to need air and not have it.” His smile widened a fraction. “When a human drowns, they reach upwards, desperate, as if trying to climb a ladder out of their predicament. Do you think, in her final moments, Shepard reached-“

He never finished the sentence. Because at that moment, Lieutenant Alenko lost his mind.
Meet Commander Shepard

September 2183

Miranda Lawson stepped off the shuttle, the heels of her tall boots clicking on the glass tiles lining the Illusive Man’s private shuttle bay. Cronos Station was the beating heart of Cerberus; all the top people, and the most advanced technology projects, resided here. The station also served as his personal residence. In all the years she’d worked for him, amid countless remote briefings, it was only the third time she’d been invited to see him face-to-face.

A young woman in a crisp black-and-white uniform, orange Cerberus insignia prominent on her chest, approached her with a smile. “Ms. Lawson? I can escort you to the Illusive Man now.”

“I know the way,” said Miranda.

Ten minutes and a long elevator ride later, she buzzed into a fortified hatch, submitted to a retinal scan and DNA sampling, and spoke the code word she’d recorded twelve hours earlier for use at this moment. There were no guards. The Illusive Man put exactly as much faith in people as they could withstand.

Miranda prided herself that he had yet to find the limit of hers.

The hatch split open. Her pistol still rode her hip; her boss was not so easily intimidated that he felt the need to strip his visitors of all armaments. Not that it mattered much. Miranda could do violence quite easily with only her hands and mind. Clever observational ports throughout the room blended seamlessly with vid screens and gave the jet black floor the appearance of floating in space. A large, dull red sun dominated the room—a spectacular demonstration of the room’s processing power, and incidentally blinding visitors as they approached his chair.

The man himself had his back to the door, a cigarette in one hand and the other dancing over a custom haptic keyboard, the primary control for an enormous bank of holographic screens. Countless data feeds streamed across their displays, too many for her to track with a mere glance. Unperturbed, Miranda crossed the room to admire the view, while she waited for him to acknowledge her.

It was amazing that the station could be so close to even such a cool star as this without overheating. Miranda had no idea which star it might be. The location of this crucial Cerberus hub was protected at the highest level.

After ten minutes or so, he dismissed the displays. Suddenly his office seemed very empty. He exhaled smoke. “Ms. Lawson.”

“Sir,” she said, turning.

“What a pleasure to see you again.”

“Why am I here?” she asked without preamble. It was a privilege, to be certain, but also an inconvenience. Miranda didn’t appreciate interruptions.

He took a drag on his cigarette. As usual, he was dressed in a tailored suit, impeccably disheveled and open at the collar, which probably cost more than Miranda’s entire wardrobe including the shoes. Not that she’d seen most of her wardrobe lately. It was in storage along with the rest of her apartment. She’d been far too busy, and too mobile, to put down her latest set of roots. Though he
was aging, the Illusive Man’s blue eyes remained as arresting as ever—moreso now, with the prominent cybernetic implants that lent them an inhuman sterility. “I wanted to congratulate you personally on your successful recovery of Commander Shepard.”

She was caught off-guard; that business was two months finished. “What was left of her, anyway.” He waved a hand, negligent. “It’s not as hopeless as you believe.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow, amused, and shifted her weight. It was a subconscious gesture, something learned by rote from birth under a harsh tutelage, and a useless one as well, here. A provocative sway of the hips wouldn’t distract him. “How is the dabbling in resurrection paying off?”

“Not well. It’s that very subject I wish to discuss.” Inhale, exhale, a cloud of wispy smoke obscuring his face. “I don’t think I need to educate you on how crucial Shepard’s efforts were, during the war.”

“Shepard did everything right. More than we could’ve hoped. Especially for someone so…”

“Untutored?” he suggested.

“Shepard’s commando training didn’t lend itself well to politics, but somehow she got the job done.” Her tone betrayed her opinion of said commando training. Miranda thought it lacked nuance.

“She discovered the truth,” he said. “The kind of truth that overwhelms diplomacy. The kind I’ve been seeking for more than twenty years.”

He had alluded to his suspicions regarding the reapers before, but no delicate inquiry had yielded a candid explanation, and she knew him better than to ask bluntly. “It’s still not enough.”

The Illusive Man tapped off the ash. “We’re at war. Nobody wants to admit it, but humanity is under attack.”

“The asari told me that Shepard thought it was the war to end all wars. She said Shepard received a kind of… vision from the Prothean beacons.” Miranda shook her head. Dr. T’Soni had been reticent—torn between protecting her dead friend, and wanting to help restore her to life. “Superstition, but…”

“Compelling. I agree.” He sat back in his chair. It was very modern, all low, banking curves in ebony wood. “Cerberus was founded with a single mission— to advance humanity. We’re not going to get very far if the reapers wipe us out.”

Miranda snorted, an inelegant gesture from such a refined woman. “The Council will never accept our help.”

“Are you beginning to understand why I sent you to recover Commander Shepard?”

She paced the room, speaking slowly. Not thinking aloud. Miranda never voiced her thoughts without due consideration. “They’d follow her. She’s a hero. A bloody icon.”

“One we can’t afford to lose.”

“She’s just one woman.”
“True. And a very dead one, at that.” The Illusive man studied Miranda for several long moments. “I would have expected more curiosity from you.”

His tone was almost chiding, a fatherly affection she found off-putting. She shrugged. “Why? There are lots of dead marines the world. The Alliance isn’t going to get this done. We both know it.”

“Shepard herself never seemed to care much for their restrictions, or inefficiencies.” He tapped his control pad, bringing up a report of medical data. “Wilson’s got her breathing again, in a manner of speaking. Her heart is pumping blood with assistance. His team has identified the organ systems in need of the most substantial repairs.”

Miranda approached the display, intrigued despite herself. “But he’s still missing the jackpot. No neurological activity.”

“None.” He lifted the cigarette to his mouth.

She drifted a step closer to the display. “I haven’t seen scans like these since I finished my thesis. Actually, I’ve never seen scans like these.”

The Illusive man exhaled. “I want you to take over the project.”

She turned in place. Her mouth fell open. “What?”

“Dr. Wilson has no creativity. He’s a good researcher, rigorous and disciplined, but he stays well within the box. And he’s not invested in the project. To him, Shepard is a pile of meat.”

“And you think I am?”

“You understand what Shepard is. More than just a dead marine.” He folded his hands over the arms of his chair. “I’ll remind you who bought your fancy education. This is the sort of thing Cerberus had in mind. What I had in mind.”

“I’m a field agent,” she protested. “A project like this could take years. I didn’t sign up—“

“I remember very well why you signed up,” he interrupted evenly. “Miranda, you’re an excellent field agent. One of my best. I don’t know where Cerberus would be without you. But sometimes I need you to apply that excellent and rather expensive brain to problems that extend beyond the next five days. Think of what Cerberus would gain allied with someone of Shepard’s credibility, and capability.”

“You’re assuming she would be an ally. After Nepheron—“

“We’re saving her life. That should count for something. And the Alliance has sat on its hands since Sovereign’s defeat- Shepard and Cerberus are on the same page when it comes to humanity’s survival. She’ll see reason.”

“It’s a big risk to take.”

“This is why I need you in charge.”

She turned away with irritation written in every line of her body. He kept his silence and let her work it out. She sighed. “There’s really nobody else?”

“Think about what you’ll be doing for humanity. You may well be the midwife to our very
survival.”

“I don’t-“

“And there’s this,” he continued, ignoring her interruption entirely. “Do this for me, and do it well, and there’ll be a follow-up. A real field operation. After she’s awake, I’ll put you in command. You’re not wrong in your misgivings about her. I’ll need someone I can trust.”

She hesitated. It was tempting.

He pushed a little harder. “I have plans for Shepard. I’d like you to be a part of them.”

“Nobody else was positioned to act when Sovereign attacked the Citadel,” she conceded after a long moment. “And it’s not getting easier. If we lose her, humanity might well follow.”

His blue eyes pierced her through. “Then see to it that we don’t lose her.”

Miranda scowled. “If I’m going to do this, I want Taylor in charge of security. I’m not going to be shipped off to hell by myself.”

“You expended quite a lot of your personal attention recruiting Taylor.” There was an unspoken question- or accusation- at the end of the sentence, wondering if she’d gotten too close.

“He’s an extraordinary capable soldier. One with the rather rarer capacity to use his brain as well as his muscle.” Her blue eyes were quite cold, offended by the suggestion that her perspective could be compromised. “He’s a valuable asset to Cerberus and I need his expertise to bring this project to heel.”

“Done.” He pressed a button, cuing up his next meeting. “And Miranda?”

She paused in her step. “Yes.”

“I’m dedicating a huge portion of Cerberus resources, including your time, to this effort. I expect a return on the investment.”

“Understood.”

/

Two weeks later, Miranda arrived at the station supporting Cerberus’ Lazarus cell. She hated the name. Biblical references were ostentatious enough without the additional implication that they were somehow playing god. Shepard’s resuscitation, if it were indeed possible, would not be a matter of miracles but of science and hard work.

Her first order of business was to visit their patient. Jacob Taylor accompanied her; as the security lead, he had no reason to be concerned with Shepard’s condition, but Miranda thought it might help his motivation if he understood the problem they faced. Jacob remained unconvinced this was an acceptable use of their talents.

The chief scientist, Dr. Wilson, met them outside the clean room. Until recently, he was also the project lead, and his sour expression made it clear that the demotion had not come as a relief. “Ms. Lawson.”

“Doctor,” she replied, just as coolly. She gestured to Jacob. “May I introduce Mr. Taylor, our new head of security.”
Wilson took him in, tall and triangular like so many soldiers. His lips thinned. “I think you’ll find this a dull post.”

“We’d like to see Shepard,” Miranda said, before they could be dragged off-topic. She kept her phrasing polite, casual, though her tone made it anything but a request.

“She’s not stable.”

Jacob crossed his arms. “I heard she was dead. How much worse could she be now?”

Miranda laughed. Wilson’s frown deepened. “As you will.”

He punched his access code into the hatch, and they entered a small staging room outfitted with sterile coverings for their clothes and numerous warning signs about the dangers of contamination. “This is a Class 1 clean room. The air is supplied by a closed-loop system for purification and insurance that no viral, microbial, or other hazardous particles enter the patient’s room. The air is sampled seven times a second and a station-wide alarm is rigged to go off if contaminants exceed specified thresholds.”

Jacob blinked. “The risk is that high?”

He didn’t bother to answer, but pointed to a shower in a back corner. “You’ll need to scrub thoroughly and pass through the UV dryer before gowning. I’ll wait inside.”

“Don’t you need to scrub?” Jacob asked.

Wilson shook his head, once, an ugly gesture. “Took care of it before you got here.”

The doctor started pulling on his protective gear as Miranda and Jacob eyed the shower facility. Jacob offered her a small bow. “Ladies first.”

She didn’t see any help for it, and began to unzip her black-and-white cat suit. It was Cerberus-issue, and provided excellent protection against cuts and abrasions as well as superior mobility. “Not much chance of privacy, I see.”

A yellow plastic curtain hung at not-quite shoulder height, but it hardly hid enough to matter. She pulled it shut anyway as she stepped into the shower and hit the button to start the procedure. The soothing voice of a VI guided her through the scrubbing process. Jacob politely averted his gaze. “This is a bigger station than I expected, but we’re in the Terminus. There’s going to be a lot lacking when it comes to amenities.”

Wilson snorted. “I hope you weren’t expecting the Four Seasons. Only princess aboard this station is her.”

He nodded through the antechamber’s only window, which overlooked a mass of machinery that effectively shrouded the patient.

Miranda’s demeanor grew a touch colder as she rotated obediently under the falling water, so that the VI-controlled shower could spray under her arm. “This will be fine.”

Dr. Wilson stepped into the decontamination airlock rather than reply, shutting Miranda and Jacob out of his immediate proximity. Miranda tried not to sound as disgusted as she felt. “I can see why the Illusive Man wanted new leadership. Somebody needs to take this place in hand.”

“You had to know it was going to be a disaster, if he’s taking your time on this.” Jacob turned as
she left the shower and stepped into the dryer with its frosted glass partition, but made no move to begin his own preparations. She caught him staring and raised an eyebrow. He cleared his throat. “Sorry. It’s just been awhile since I’ve seen you… Well. The last several months haven’t done you any harm.”

She almost smiled. He cleared his throat and glanced away. “I didn’t think my first formal assignment as a Cerberus agent would be with you.”

“Is that a problem?” Miranda couldn’t keep the trace of bemusement from her tone.

“Not really. Just makes me wonder what I’m not seeing, since the Illusive Man has you handling me.”

She was surprised. “No one’s handling you. I requested you for this assignment.”

“Because we-“

“No,” she said firmly, cutting him off. “Because I doubt Shepard will see Cerberus’ merits any more easily than you. And because I needed someone whose reliability was known.”

There wasn’t much he could say to that. Fifteen minutes later, they were finally ready to meet Nathaly Shepard.

Miranda exited the airlock first. The patient’s room was larger than she expected- larger than it looked through the window. The area where Shepard lay was only one part of a complex that included a full operating theater and diagnostic suite. Wilson was already immersed in the thick of the machines doing the hard work of keeping Shepard in some state of “alive”, alongside several technicians swathed in their own sterile gear.

She moved towards the table. It was too plain to call a bed. On it lay a woman, flat on her back, staring out at nothing. Jacob let out a curse. Miranda had seen Shepard’s body before, in the stasis pod she reclaimed some months prior, but it looked different like this, connected to the medical apparatus by countless tubes and wires. They snaked through her body like some manner of disease, cold and sinister, glinting in the white light of the lab.

Shepard looked somehow both more and less alive than when Miranda left her last. There was color to her skin now- a warmth underlying the brown that was absent in the pod- but it had an artificiality about it that made her shudder. The body was so riddled with damage and machinations that it hardly resembled the commander.

“No way,” Jacob breathed.

Wilson was amused. “I assure you, this is Commander Shepard. We’ve verified her identity several times over.”

Miranda’s gaze cut to him. “You think this is funny?”

The sly grin dropped off his face. “No.”

“Let’s make one thing absolutely clear.” Miranda straightened and rested her hands on her hips. “I’m here because you couldn’t do your job to the Illusive Man’s standards.”

“He didn’t give me enough time-“

“If that were true, you’d still be the director of this program instead of the chief scientist.”
Wilson looked away and scoffed, trying to wriggle out of the scrutiny of her blue eyes, but she kept him pinned to the air. Miranda waited a long moment for a response, and continued in the same quiet, final tone. “As the new director, you will address me as Ms. Lawson or ma’am. So I’ll ask again. Do you think this is funny?”

In the background, Jacob shook his head and moved off, turning his attention to the plethora of medical equipment—though whether to avoid the uncomfortable sight of Shepard’s corpse, or the nascent argument, couldn’t be told. Wilson cleared his throat. “No, ma’am.”

“Exactly.” She nodded towards the body. “I read your last three reports on the shuttle. You went out of your way to avoid clarifying the difficulties of this project. So give me the rundown.”

Wilson appeared to weigh his options, and then capitulated to the inevitable. “You want the short version? Almost none of her organ systems function unassisted.”

“So we’ll need to start a cloning room.”

He shook his head. “It’s not that simple. We can’t even consider transplants until we get the chemistry problem under control. Her hormone panel is completely out of whack. A dead woman shouldn’t produce any, but I can’t explain the residual amount in her system.”

“Let me see.” Miranda took the datapad he handed her, and skimmed the results. She raised her eyes to him. “Are you serious? This isn’t a joke?”

“We tried a couple of meds, checked all her glands—”

Miranda slammed down the datapad with such force that tools on the cart jumped a half-centimeter into the air. She approached the patient. “Is she sedated?”

“Pardon?” Wilson was struggling to keep up.

“Can I cut into her?” Miranda clarified, impatient.

“A small incision shouldn’t—”

“Scalpel,” she ordered. One of the techs, who had listened in throughout the exchange and could sense the change in the wind, handed it to her without hesitation, suffering a nasty glare from Wilson in consequence.

Miranda took Shepard’s forearm and flipped it over. She felt along the length of it briefly, before she thumbed the cover off the scalpel, cut a two-centimeter incision, and squeezed out a small microchip with an attached vial. The same tech passed her a pair of forceps without being asked. Miranda fully extracted the chip and tossed it into a sterile metal pan with open contempt. “Contraceptive implant. I think you’ll find it accounts for the hormone excess you’ve so diligently recorded.”

Wilson stared at the pan, and swallowed.

Miranda rattled it at him. “Did you even read her medical records?”

“I glanced through them.” He avoided her gaze. “They didn’t seem relevant given the extent of the damage from the Normandy wreck.”

“Alright.” Miranda looked around the lab. She didn’t bother to disguise her irritation. “We’re starting over, right now. I want a summary—no more than five pages—documenting Shepard’s
condition on arrival and what procedures have been performed to date, on my desk in two hours’
time. Until I’ve reviewed it, no further work will be performed. Am I clear?”

The techs nodded as one body. Wilson’s nod was curt, grudgingly given, but he was sufficiently
self-aware to realize he’d lost this round. Miranda headed for the hatch. “Jacob.”

“Ma’am.” He fell into step behind her, casting a final, lingering glance on the biological mess that
was Commander Shepard.

“While they’re getting me a medical report, let’s check in with security. I hope it’s in a better state
than what I’ve seen here.”

Jacob shook his head. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

Ten hours later, Miranda walked into the director’s office at the top of the station and closed the
hatch behind her with an exhausted sigh. It was an elegant space—a vaulted ceiling capped by an
expansive port that offered a clear view of the stars, decorated in simple black and white—but the
status of the Lazarus Project inured her to such small comforts.

Jacob absorbed the day’s revelations with a more sanguine attitude. He located a mini-fridge under
the desk and explored the contents. “Wilson has excellent taste. I haven’t seen some of these
labels since I left Earth. You want something?”

“You really want to sit down and have a drink?”

“Is the situation going to get any worse if I have a beer?”

She started to make a sarcastic reply, but instead sank into the depths of a lounge chair and
massaged her forehead. “Give me something on the lighter end.”

“Still no taste for porters, huh?” He grabbed a pair of bottles, popped the tops, and joined her in
the sitting area.

“My head’s hurting enough as it is.” She took a draw off hers, and regarded the label with some
surprise. “This is quite good.”

“What did I say?” Jacob took a long drink of his own.

They sat there for several minutes, drinking and winding down from the day’s rough introduction,
before Miranda spoke. “So. What do you think?”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you.” He smiled.

She laughed, a bit ruefully. “Wilson’s team made an acceptable start, incorporating the results
from Nepheron’s lab to restore some function with machines, but the Illusive Man was right. We
need real innovation.”

“Glad it’s not me.”

“Don’t be so quick to count yourself out. Those security mechs were a disaster.”

“Never did like mechs. But when in Rome, I guess.” He took another sip, the grin fading. “Kinda
wish you hadn’t brought me into this.”

She blinked, genuinely taken aback. “Why?”
He got up and paced the room, wandering back and forth along the length of the wall several times, searching for the words. “You know I was in the Alliance.”

“I pulled you out of the Alliance.” Her mouth quirked at the memory. “If memory serves, it was the possibility of saving Shepard that convinced you to leave.”

“Technically, I was a contractor then. Still.” He folded his arms. “Shepard was a marine, same as me. I was stationed on Eden Prime when Saren torched it. I owe her for taking him out- avenging the people I served with.”

“I don’t see how a project to revive Shepard is at odds with that.”

“You don’t understand. You’re a scientist, an infiltrator. You’re pragmatic. I respect that, but…” Jacob grimaced. “That thing downstairs in the lab- I’m not sure that’s even a person. And I’m not sure what the Illusive Man intends to do with it if you get it up and running again.”

“The Alliance left her out there to die. If I hadn’t intervened, she’d be in Collector hands now. Do you think their plans were any kinder?”

“She’s already dead, Miranda. What I saw in that room wasn’t life. It’s a matter of respect.”

“Science has always pushed against natural boundaries-“

“This is way beyond pushing a boundary. This is as unnatural as it gets.” He was frustrated. “When we tried to recover Shepard that first time, and you said she could be dead- I never imagined that wouldn’t be the end of the conversation. Who would? You told me yourself that we were just making sure.”

She sat back in the chair and draped her arms over the rests. “I’d think Shepard of all people would have an appreciation for what we’re trying to accomplish. She was hardly a stranger to morally gray decisions. She let the galactic Council and ten thousand other people die aboard the Ascension in the Battle of the Citadel alone.”

He waved away her argument. “I’m not putting Shepard up for sainthood. I’m saying I’m not sure I want a part in creating her afterlife.”

“Fair enough.” Miranda stood and went to the desk, activating the terminal. “I think I know a way to help both of us.”

He was interested despite himself. “How’s that?”

“I don’t know much about Shepard.” She tapped the keyboard and brought up a list of every identified task required to make the Lazarus Project a success. “Once I’ve got her brain firing on all cylinders again, I’ll need to understand how it works. Not physiologically. Psychologically. That knowledge will be essential to ensuring her successful recovery.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You want to see that she’s treated with respect, in accordance with her beliefs. I need to know what makes her tick.” Miranda opened the directory entitled psych profile and glanced through the selection of documents. “Look into these, see what they say to you. I look forward to the advantages your… divergent perspective can provide.”

He resumed pacing. “Miranda, I’m a soldier. I don’t think I’m the right person.”
“You were Alliance, like her. You said so yourself. And you’re invested. I can’t think of anyone more suited.” She looked up at him. Her mouth turned up at the corner. “Besides, you’ll need something to keep you from getting bored to death, managing those mechs. Consider it a side project.”

He chuckled at that. “Alright. No promises, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“Can’t ask for better.” She began to forward files, frowning as she went. “There’s a staggering amount of information here that should prove useful, if you don’t put it to waste like Wilson did.”

She clicked off the terminal and stretched. A yawn escaped. “The first of many long days, I suspect.”

“I’ll let you get to sleep.” He started for the elevator.

Miranda brushed her hand over the rich wood of the desk in a moment of uncharacteristic uncertainty. “You could stay, if you like.”

The surprise showed on his face. She licked her lips. “I’ve missed you.”

“I…” He rubbed his forehead. “I’ve missed you, too. I’m just not convinced it’s a good idea to stop missing you. Not yet.”

“Well,” she said, taking the rejection with what grace she could muster, “Consider the offer open.”

“Thanks.” He hit the elevator call button, and glanced at the transferred files as he waited. His eyebrows climbed into his hair. “Where did you get these records?”

Her mouth turned up at the corner, humorless. “We have our ways. Or did you believe you were the only member of the Alliance military to see our point of view?”

The carriage arrived. Jacob hit the button for his floor. “Goodnight, Miranda.”

“Goodnight.” She watched the doors close behind him, and stared at the paint for a long moment before she went to change for bed.
Consequences

October 2183

“Guests of Shuttle Flight 6417, we are making our final approach to the Citadel.”

Alenko jerked awake as the flight attendant finished her announcement, just in time to see her smile vacantly into the shuttle’s PA transmitter. They had been in transit for a little over two days. “We will be docked in fifteen minutes. Please ensure your seat belt is securely fastened and await crew instructions before disembarking. Thank you.”

The Agincourt wasn’t due back to port for another month. As a high-value prisoner, Farrell had been left at the nearest Alliance outpost and escorted to a proper facility for treatment. Their medical officer managed to stabilize him as best she could, but some things were beyond what a frigate’s med bay could provide.

As an officer on medical leave, Alenko had been deposited on the dock and expected to make his way home on standby, to await the dreaded attentions of other specialists.

He hadn’t slept much. A catnap here or there over the past six days since he woke up in the Agincourt’s med bay strapped down with velcro restraints. A sick feeling as he saw Farrell’s limp form in the bed across from his, the VI assistant bot hovering over him, making delicate adjustments. The doctor’s brusque judgement when she asked him if the headache was subsiding. His migraine from the attack had been so savage she actually put him under until the worst of it passed. After experiencing those final fading hours, Alenko didn’t want to even imagine the worst of it.

There was a gentle thunk as the shuttle made contact with the magnetic docking clamps, and then the stomach-dropping moment when the its gravity turned off and the Citadel’s rotation took over. Around him the other passengers rose, grumbling, and pulled their bags from the overhead compartments before shuffling down the aisle to the tube. He hauled down his rucksack and followed the tide.

He’d never set foot in the Citadel’s commercial dock. Despite its resemblance to every other station dock in the galaxy in all respects save for scale, it felt an alien place. Something not of this world, something he could look at without quite being able to touch. The very air seemed strange. Though he spent most of week trying to get here, he realized he never quite expected to arrive. Arriving made everything that happened on Chasca, and on the Agincourt afterwards, terribly real.

Alenko stepped away from the stream of passengers departing the shuttle and adjusted the pack on his shoulder, trying to get his bearings. Trying, in fact, to figure out what to do now.

Even the smallest decision like walking towards the exit seemed impossibly out of reach, his thoughts soupy with an exhaustion far more profound than lack of sleep. Three months desperately holding onto his life with his teeth and for what? He might as well have given up the day they laid Nathaly to rest; it all ended the same. There was no way DMHS wouldn’t discharge him, no matter what he said about the attack. There was no way he still had a career or indeed any kind of personal identity left. It all disappeared in a cloud of debris along with her body.

It might have been a minute or an hour later when a pair of marine privates in crisp dress blues entered the docking bay. At first Alenko thought they were on their way to the shuttle, returning, perhaps, to the small outpost he just left, until they veered towards him and stopped several feet
away. “Staff Lieutenant Alenko?”

Alenko was abruptly conscious of his sweat-stained and rumpled utilities, which he hadn’t been able to change in days, his greasy hair and stubbled face. He cleared his throat. “Yes?”

“Sir.” The nearest man straightened to something near attention. “We’re to escort you to the naval outpost.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, fumbling through his confusion with a brain that would only work at half-speed. “An escort to what?”

“Apologies, sir. We have orders to bring you directly. If you’ll come this way, we have a car waiting.”

He took in their stiff, almost bored formality and really saw the dress uniforms, and finally recognized these men for what they were- guards. Likely stationed at the office of some very senior commander aboard the Citadel. There were always a few grunts standing post around a place a like that, for visible security and running little errands like this.

Which meant he didn’t really have any choice but to go with them, or a make a scene that likely ended with him going anyway, possibly with an intermediate stop at C-Sec.

Still. “This is crazy. I was on that shuttle for forty-eight hours. All Command had to do was order me to report.”

“I couldn’t say, sir.” Implacable. “If you’ll just follow us, please.”

Alenko regarded that face a moment longer, empty as it was of all expression. Then he hiked his rucksack up on his shoulder and allowed them to lead him to a blue and white Alliance aircar. One of the marines climbed in the back with him, while the other sat at the controls. The ward flowed beneath them as they gained altitude, a ribbon of gray buildings and orange light, only one of the Citadel’s five long arms. That, at least, was familiar.

Once or twice, he tried another question, but they were no more forthcoming than on the dock. His trepidation grew.

At the Alliance naval outpost, his keepers marched him to a waiting room and left him there. So at least nobody thought he was a security threat. Twenty minutes passed, and then an hour. Enough for him to start getting really nervous. Wild speculations crossed his mind- that he was being arrested, that he was being discharged, that behind that door waited the Minister of Defense herself, here to ream him out personally- though Alenko knew quite well that wasn’t how any of it worked.

He jumped when the hatch finally slid open. “Staff Lieutenant Alenko?”

“Yes.” Belatedly, Alenko noticed her rank and found his feet, clumsily. “Captain.”

“Come in.” She had a clockwork air about her, a brisk efficiency, like he was merely one of several dozen tasks on her list for the day.

Her office was a good one, for the cramped confines of the Citadel. A bulky port looked out over the neighboring ward arm- Kithoi, if memory served. Her desk of clean white epoxy looked new, the dark leather padding the steel chairs almost real to the eye, metal parts gleaming. She gestured for him to sit.
Alenko did so, awkwardly, resting his great lump of a rucksack on the floor as she took her own seat behind the desk. “Nobody’s told me what I’m doing here.”

She ignored the question, opening her terminal. It was an old style with a metal backing rather than a transparent holographic interface. He couldn’t read the screen backwards from across the desk; he couldn’t see it at all.

The captain tapped at her keyboard. “You really landed in the soup with Farrell.”

A tiny jolt of something like adrenaline shot through him. “I don’t suppose you can tell me what you did to him,” the medical officer had said. “Looks like something put his organs through a blender.”

“I still don’t know who you are,” he said.

“Oh, right.” She folded her hands on the desktop and looked at him directly. “I’m Captain Rahimi, the senior intelligence officer assigned to Admiral Hackett’s office, and one of his adjuncts aboard the Citadel. I keep him apprised of events beyond Alliance space.”

“Intelligence?” Alenko felt he was fumbling through an unfamiliar room in the pitch dark, and kept stumbling over unexpected surprises. Her being on Hackett’s staff was like tripping over a motorcycle in a living room.

“The man calling himself Geoffrey Farrell is of great interest to a number of people.” White teeth flashed briefly in her olive face, a perfunctory smile.

“Farrell isn’t his real name?”

“Let’s say it’s one of his real names.” Rahimi was all business. “In his day job, Dr. Farrell is a leading researcher in the field of bio-digital neural interfaces. Cyborgs, in the popular parlance.”

“Is he ex-Alliance?”

Her easy tone never wavered. “And why would you ask that?”

“Dr. Wayne is,” he replied evenly, naming another scientist captured at Nepheron, the one responsible for murdering Nathaly’s squad on Akuze.

“He was a researcher for the intelligence ministry.” Rahimi sat back, folding her hands in her lap. “And I think you know enough about Cerberus to know that’s not unusual.”

“And in his off-hours he fed all that research to Cerberus?”

“I’m sure you appreciate Farrell’s dossier is strictly need-to-know. One objective of this interview is to determine what, if anything, he told you that you didn’t need to know.”

His confusion deepened. “I barely spoke to him.”

“Ah, but you did speak.” She tilted her head. “All the major players are interested, but Farrell refuses to say a word to anyone. Aside from his doctors, on strictly medical matters resulting from your… altercation.”

Alenko’s face reddened with traces of shame at the reminder. “Yes, we spoke.”

After being relieved of duty, on their last day aboard ship, Farrell asked to speak to Alenko. Still wincing with guilt and tired of finding ways to hide from the contempt and pity of his former
crewmates, he agreed.

“Farrell was barely lucid,” Alenko added. It was not entirely true. Farrell was heavily drugged, mostly to cope with the pain, and rambling, but his speech was clear enough. “It wasn’t a productive conversation.”

“Did you know each other?”

He shook his head. “Farrell claimed we met on Nepheron last May, but I don’t recall him myself. The scientists we detained kept their heads down.”

Nathaly had been on the warpath after discovering Akuze was an elaborate Cerberus experiment. Even her own crew were hesitant to wander into her line of sight, to say nothing of Dr. Wayne, or Farrell, or any of their accomplices.

“Nepheron being the Cerberus lab captured by Commander Shepard near the end of the war.”

“Shepard was a bull in a china shop,” Farrell sneered, reclined in his hospital bed, apropos of nothing but tattered dignity. “All destruction and no appreciation for what was in front of her.”

He tried hard not to think of her in the days that followed, as they waited for the navy patrol to arrive to take over lab, wavering between a wound that bordered on mortal and incandescent rage. Nothing he did could soothe her.

Alenko cleared his throat. “Yes.”

Rahimi entered something into her terminal. Not being able to see what she recorded was driving him up the wall. Without looking away, she said, “If you didn’t know him, then I have to ask, why try to kill him?”

“I wasn’t trying to kill him.” The bluntness of the question came out of nowhere and left him off-balance.

Her tone remained mild. Like they were discussing what they brought for lunch. “That was a brutal attack for someone with no history of violent tendencies.”

Sitting in that faux-leather chair in Rahimi’s little office, Alenko could still feel a ghost of the tide of dark energy coursing down the nerves of his arm and shooting towards Farrell, answering the urge of something deeper than his conscious mind but still entirely himself.

He could still hear the thud and sickening crack of Vyrnnus hitting the bulkhead.

*No history of violence.*

When he remained silent, Rahimi prodded. “You launched some manner of biotic attack, and then proceeded to beat him about the head with your rifle.”

A trickle of sweat ran down his back and soaked into his filthy shirt. That had been Nguyen’s addition to the official report, though Morris corroborated it when asked. Alenko cleared his throat a second time. “I don’t remember that.”

“Young squad had to pull you off him bodily-“

“I already gave my report to Captain Belanger back aboard the Agincourt,” he interrupted.

“Yes, I have it here.”
“Then you already know all this.” Managing a hint of impatience. A push back against having to recite that story a second time. Rahimi was even sharper than Belanger, and he still had some distant hope that at the end of this incident, he might salvage something of his career. What else did he have left but the work?

“Belanger placed you on medical leave rather than detain you pending investigation and court martial.” Rahimi clicked through a document, presumably Belanger’s own report. “He concluded your attack on Farrell was a traumatic response and remanded you to DMHS.”

*Back in the Agincourt’s med bay, Belanger rubbed his chin, regarding him. “Your squad said you were provoked. Even Nguyen agreed on that much.”*

As if reading his mind, Rahimi said, “The report indicated you were provoked.”

Alenko took a breath. Folded his hands in his lap, realized he was fidgeting, and moved them to the arms of the chair instead. “As I said, my report is available. And if we’re going to continue on this topic, I deserve to have council present.”

“Staff Lieutenant, I couldn’t care less whether your assault was excusable per regulations.” Her eyes bore into him. Each word was like a thrown dagger. “I am trying to determine what Farrell communicated to you that caused a mild-tempered officer to fly into a fit of rage so extraordinary that his own memory ceased to function. My sole objective is to maintain the security of the Alliance. And nothing that is happening in this room right now should be mistaken for a request.”

He stared. Rahimi sat back, returned her hands to the haptic keyboard, and looked at him coldly. “So I’ll ask one more time. What did Farrell say?”

And maybe out of shock, maybe out of a lifetime of conditioning to respond to that tone from a superior officer, and maybe just a little because Farrell deserved to have some of his vileness displayed, Alenko answered. “He was fixated on the circumstances of Nathaly’s death.”

That was the most Alenko could say about it, without speaking Farrell’s graphic conjectures aloud, without seeing those imagined scenes play out against the inside of his eyelids again. Without breathing that sort of life into them.

It was not what Rahimi expected to hear, and it took her a moment to process. “You’re referring to Commander Shepard. That’s what set you off?”

The implication—*that’s ALL that set you off?*—set a match to his nervousness and sparked a flame of anger. One that doused self-preservation. “He said he hoped Nathaly died in agony from slow suffocation after the attack on the *Normandy.*”

“Seems a pretty empty taunt,” Rahimi said, full of doubt. Her eyebrows raised, just enough to notice, a deliberate comment on his outburst. “Shepard’s been dead for months.”

“Seems a pretty empty taunt,” Rahimi said, full of doubt. Her eyebrows raised, just enough to notice, a deliberate comment on his outburst. “Shepard’s been dead for months.”

A second wave, something closer kin to rage. He opened his mouth—

Then took in her continued calm, the arch of her eyebrows, the way she snapped back and forth between threats and indifference like shrugging on clothing. She was goading him. This wasn’t an interview; it was an interrogation. And from all appearances, it was being conducted by an expert in the art.

That was why he was brought here immediately, tired from travel and stewing on events, with no warning or opportunity to prepare, and made to wait so long.
Alenko bit back his initial response. Instead, he thought about Farrell’s bitterness as he explained later, aboard ship, that he wasn’t even supposed to be on Nepheron. It wasn’t his work site. He was less than an hour from departure when Toombs set fire to the base to buy a distraction while he hunted the scientists who tortured him.

The *Normandy* arrived not long after. It was one of the more powerful coincidences in a mission that seemed chock full of serendipity. And from there, well, Nathaly happened.

Farrell rightly blamed Nathaly for his capture. But that wasn’t what had him so disgusted with being caught again. And it didn’t explain Rahimi’s interest.

His eyes narrowed. “Why do you care what Farrell said about Nathaly?”

“You know, Shepard’s caused me a lot of work over the years. Before, during, and even after the war. Her dossier would sit this high if you printed it out.” She hovered her palm about six centimeters above the desk. “You’re the first person I’ve debriefed who calls her Nathaly.”

Alenko couldn’t remember when that started. Sometime after Noveria. That was how natural the transition felt.

“She preferred it,” he said with a measure of frost. Broadly speaking, this was true. Nathaly just wasn’t any good at wanting things.

“Hmm.” Rahimi tapped out a few more notes, her fingers dancing in the air. Letting the silence play out until Alenko was squirming. He couldn’t help it. She spoke to the terminal screen. “Did Farrell mention his area of study? The sorts of experiments he conducted?”

Alenko shook his head. “Not in so many words.”

“But he hinted.”

*Farrell’s face, ratlike and strangely earnest in the wan light, as he spoke to Alenko from his hospital bed.* Slowly, Alenko said, “He claimed Cerberus is going to save humanity.”

Rahimi actually laughed. “I’ll bet he did.”

He sat back, crossed his arms, then uncrossed them, fidgeting again. That was unlike him. The five days of leave since the *Agincourt* deposited him on that map dot of an outpost hadn’t done much to improve his state of mind. Nor did being back here, aboard the Citadel.

Nathaly was still dead. He’d still tried to kill Farrell over it. And Captain Rahimi sat here laughing.

He looked away before the words he was thinking could slither onto his tongue.

Rahimi eyed him over the top of the terminal, as if she could read his every emotion. “What else about his work?”

*Halfway to the hatch when Farrell asked, “What has the Alliance done about the reapers since Sovereign fell?”*

*Alenko started. “How do you…”*

“What has the Alliance done?” Farrell repeated. “I’m all sincerity”

“I’m not going to discuss-“
“It’s nothing, right.” Farrell shook his head. “I know I’m right. They’ve done nothing. Cerberus has collected information about the reapers for at least a decade. Maybe longer. My clearance didn’t go that high.”

He folded and unfolded his hands, then silently cursed them into stillness. “He mentioned the reapers.”

Captain Rahimi stopped typing. Alenko carried on. “I know everyone thinks they’re a figment of Na- of Shepard’s imagination, but I know what I saw while serving aboard the Normandy. And Farrell knew something about them, too. I’m sure of it.”

“Lieutenant Alenko, I will remind you that this room is not cleared for discussions classified above Secret, as advertised at the entrance to this wing.” Her eyes fixed on him, abruptly sharp, enough to make him edge back in his seat. “Furthermore, you are not briefed to the relevant programs. Your discretion is required.”

His mouth dropped open. It took him a moment to recover his voice. “Are you saying-”

“I won’t remind you of your legal obligations again.” Her gaze returned to the terminal display. Alenko let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. If it was classified- but nobody was looking into the reapers. The navy had made a laughingstock of everyone who insisted they were real since the end of the war.

Rahimi resumed her notetaking, blithely ignoring the bomb that had just dropped into the room. “Did he mention Project Osiris?”

His mind was chasing itself in circles over that set of implications. It took a moment to register her question, and another to process it. His brow furrowed. “You mean Egyptian mythology?”

“That’s a no, then.” She seemed satisfied.

And… relieved?

Alenko leaned forward despite his better judgment. Apparently serving on Nathaly’s crew didn’t wear off that easily. “Look, this would be a lot less of a fishing expedition if you’d just tell me what you’re looking for.”

“Let’s stick to the script,” she answered, a touch harshly.

He wasn’t at all inclined to play along. “Why is Farrell even working for Cerberus? I can’t imagine there was a shortage of work for a man of his talents during a synthetic invasion.”

“You can’t seriously be laboring under the delusion that Cerberus is forced to recruit only those people with no other options.” But then she paused. “Farrell has some significant family difficulties. There’s speculation Cerberus may have been more sympathetic than his previous employer.”

“I can’t imagine how Farrell might have alienated his family.”

Her expression soured at his sarcasm. “That comment tells me he didn’t mention that situation, either. Did he disclose any of his interrogations by the navy after being taken into Alliance custody?”

Alenko wanted nothing more than this conversation to be over. “No.”
“Did he mention how he planned to rejoin Cerberus on Chasca?”

“I don’t think he did.” Alenko stuffed his hands in his pockets, then remembered himself and folded them in his lap. “I speculated that they wouldn’t come back for him unless he could offer them something worthwhile, and he didn’t deny it. I think that’s why he went to Chasca.”

“And what, exactly, was he trying to retrieve?”

Alenko shook his head. “No idea.”

“Great.” She typed a final word and set the her hands down on the desk with a click of her nails. Smiled at him, politely. He anticipated the interview was almost over, some of the tension leaving his shoulders.

Then she said, “Just one final clarification. You spoke to Farrell twice, during which he apparently never mentioned anything worth reporting, and yet you came within five units of blood of ending his life. Why? Because he talked a little smack about Shepard?”

“She was one of the closest friends I’ve ever had.” The words came hot and hard, and true as any he’d ever spoken. He missed her in a thousand ways, but that was the one that hurt the worst, that kept him up at night and slogging through the days. Going on about it was unwise, but he couldn’t have stopped himself for anything. A little smack- Farrell had been downright insulting. “She died alone, a long way from home, to get as many people as she could off that ship. Including me. So yes, when someone goes out of their way to disrespect what happened, I get riled up.”

“I simply have to wonder if there is a more substantial history between you and Dr. Farrell than what has been conveyed.”

His aggravation subsided. His brow furrowed. “Are you asking…”

And then he stopped himself and straightened in the chair, because the end of that sentence was if I’m an agent of Cerberus, and there was no way voicing that suggestion ended well for him. No matter that it was patently false. “There is no history between me and him.”

Rahimi tried a new tact. “Did Shepard ever mention Farrell to you? Since you were such close friends.”

“You’re saying Nathaly knew him before Nepheron.” He blinked. Rahimi was an expert in yanking people around. “That’s impossible. She would have recognized him-“

But would she? In that state of mind, with as hard as the scientists were trying to become invisible?

Farrell was so intensely resentful of her. Maybe even too much so for his circumstances.

Sensing an opening, Rahimi prodded him again. “Did she ever express wanting to hurt him? In any sense of the word?”

Alenko stared at her, dumbfounded, completely unable to even guess where she was going with this. Rahimi pressed the point. “Maybe you recognized him, or the name Farrell, and did it for her?”

His mouth opened without seeking any kind of permission from his brain. “What did he do to her?”

Her expression turned doubtful. “So she really never said a word.”
“No. She didn’t.”

Their eyes met for a long moment, his hard, hers speculative. He held her gaze, sudden suspicion overriding nerves.

You hid Akuze from Nathaly, he wanted to say but did not. And Wayne’s very public preliminary hearing just hit the news in a banner headline. What else did you do to her that you’re so afraid of someone finding out? What are beans are you worried Farrell spilled?

Then Rahimi broke off, pushed out her chair, and extended her hand. “Thank you for meeting with me. We may have some follow-up questions.”

He took her hand, again unsteady, hated knowing that was her intent. “You know where to find me.”

“Good luck with your… recovery.” She flashed a smile, sharp and predatory. “Someone will be in to show you out.”

The promised aide soon materialized, and left him standing in the lobby, rucksack in hand with his head still spinning. Apparently Farrell was a higher-value prisoner than he thought. But that wasn’t for him to worry about, and he used up every scrap of self-possession he had to make it through the debrief in a coherent fashion.

Standing outside the Alliance outpost and caught up in a steady traffic of navy personnel headed home, Alenko lacked conviction he’d managed even that much. Belanger warned him before he disembarked that Farrell was radioactive, but refused to say anything further. Possibly he didn’t know enough to cite specifics.

He’d said something else as well. “If I thought you meant to harm Farrell, I’d hang you out to dry. As it is, I think you could benefit from some time away from this and some professional assistance. But I can’t have a marine on my ship who can’t keep a grip on himself.”

Alenko shuddered. Then took a deep breath, and forced his feet towards the nearest taxi stand. People kept saying assaulting Farrell without meaning it was somehow the better option. All it told him is he learned not a damn thing about self-control in the past fifteen years. Not with Farrell, and not with Rahimi now, either. Maybe if he had, his grief wouldn’t still have ahold of him like this. Maybe he’d still be on the Agincourt.

The cab took him home. As much of a home as he had on this station.

Thumbprint access let Alenko into the apartment building. The elevator took him to the twenty-sixth floor. There was no such thing as non-compact living in the Citadel wards.

The building’s VI greeted him warmly as he stepped through the hatch. “Good afternoon, Lieutenant Alenko.”

He stared into the empty room. It had been his apartment for three months, one week, and five days. Which was one week less than when he and Nathaly started looking for a place to live. Neither of them was picky, and they were working on a short timeline, with him due to report for transfer to the Agincourt. Anything would do.

God, but he’d never seen her so worked up as when she got notification of those transfer orders. If an expression could truly freeze a person solid, he’d still be an icicle on the Normandy deck. But then she did something he thought he’d never see—she sat down and listened. He told her he wanted to make them real, and she asked him if he was serious enough to sign a lease. Because she
always went full-tilt at everything.

The original plan was for him to spend a few days furnishing the place before re-deploying. But after the funeral, he focused what little energy he had on getting re-activated- getting away from here. He slept in the bathtub. That was Nathaly’s only request, that the apartment have a bathtub, and she never got to use it.

And so the only objects in the apartment were a few towels and toiletries, a half dozen frozen meals and plastic cutlery, the ill-fitting suit Liara made him wear to the memorial, and Nathaly’s flag folded up on top of her jacket by the wall.

He crouched down and picked up the fabric in both hands, running his thumbs over the coarse blue cotton broadcloth, along the stitching of the stars and prow that signified the Systems Alliance flag. Stupid custom. Even sillier when there wasn’t any body to bury- just an empty coffin to make the positively asinine ceremony a little less awkward. Alenko got the sense Nathaly’s mother felt the same way. Certainly, she hadn’t shown any reluctance about offering him the stupid thing after.

The jacket technically belonged to her father, and Alenko had a hunch he would like it back, but he had nothing else left that Nathaly had ever touched or worn or cared about in any way. She left it at a Citadel restaurant just before that last mission. When he retrieved it months ago, there was still a trace of her scent on the collar. Still her shape in the ways the leather molded to her over the years. Now he was afraid to smell it, certain it had gone but not wanting the confirmation.

Instead he picked up both bundles and put them on the shelf in the coat closet. Shut them away, his head too full and sore to think about them any longer. Things would be better in the morning. They had to be.

Alenko bunched up his rucksack on the floor, laid his head down on it, and tried to sleep.
Twenty-two-year-old Nathaly Shepard turned at the sound of the front door opening. Todd stepped into their rental house and called out. “Nath?”

She grimaced, just for a second. She hoped to be done before he got home. “In here!”

He followed the sound of her voice, and came in carrying a lumpy plastic bag. She smiled despite herself when he hugged her from behind and planted a kiss on her cheek. She leaned into him. “I thought you’d be at the library until late.”

“Even with quals in three weeks, I can only concentrate for so long.” Todd gave her a squeeze. “If I had to look at any more hydrocarbon photochemistry I was going to start bleeding from the eyes.”

He’d been gone for a grand total of four hours. Shepard tried to reach for a little sympathy, grad school not exactly renowned as the intellectual soft option, but her job never gave her the choice of stopping just because her concentration was shot. “You’ve been studying for five months. I’m sure an evening off won’t hurt.”

“I brought dinner. Hellas Cucina.” He hefted the bag. Then he caught sight of her rucksack and pile of gear spread across their kitchen table, and his good mood evaporated by inches. “Going somewhere?”

“I’ve been summoned to Rio,” she said shortly, and crammed her utilities into the sack so he could set down the food. “They moved up my re-qualification a few months.”

He released her, abruptly rigid. “Didn’t you do that last year?”

“They always make you go after an incident.” She searched for her extra socks. “It’s N-division, Todd. They can’t have missions going sideways because some marine didn’t want to admit a problem.”

“You only got back from Elysium three weeks ago.” He all but dropped the bag, nearly on top of her hand.

“That was the incident.” Shepard pushed the food aside and continued to pack. Todd might be her fiancé, but she kept him away from her professional life. Most of her family was military and there was no hiding anything from them, and she appreciated having one person in her life who didn’t compel her to talk shop. She needed the mental break his relative ignorance provided.

But the Skyllian Blitz had been all over the news, on every network, and he wasn’t acclimating to his enlightenment particularly well. “They can’t expect you to go back out again this soon. It’s damned irresponsible.”

She closed her eyes and reached for patience. “It’s not like I was injured.”

Not technically true. She got her share of scrapes and bruises, but coming home from a mission a bit worn around the edges was nothing new, and Todd was used to that. Or so she’d thought. He bristled. “That’s not the point.”

Three weeks of this was enough. Shepard glared. “Save the protective instincts for someone who
needs it.”

“God forbid I ever worry about you-“

“You knew the score from the first five minutes we met.” Hell, the first thing he learned about her after her name was her job.

“I thought this shit would stop when you got out of officer training.”

She’d graduated knife-and-fork school at the start of the year, after a rocky transition from enlisted. Another subject of much debate. “Yeah, well, it won’t.”

He started to say something, thought better of it, and went out onto the patio instead, slamming the door behind him. Shepard shoveled more gear into her rucksack, giving her own temper a chance to cool. Todd had no reference point for understanding real danger and tended to catastrophize. She’d have to try harder to minimize it, that was all. Find a few benign or humorous stories from her next few times out. Make things normal again.

She finished up and followed him outside, and found him staring at their backyard full of red Martian dust with his arms crossed. She touched his shoulder. “It’s a few weeks in a simulator, at a firing range, and get poked and prodded in medical. Then when I get back, we can celebrate you passing quals. Maybe visit that new club that opened last month.”

He made no reply. She tried again. “I’ll be safer than you are here.”

“Is that so,” he said flatly.

Shepard put her hand under his chin and forced him to look upward, at the flutter of the tent just barely visible high overhead, all that kept Hellas Basin habitable. “A few good meteorites and you are toast.”

“The tent’s stronger than that,” he protested, automatically.

She pointed to Phobos, sitting low on the horizon. “Or that moon could choose next week to finally crash land on this planet.”

“They’ll have it fully stabilized within ten years.” To Todd, a planetary scientist, her feigned ignorance was nearly offensive. But he was starting to smile- despite his best efforts not to.

Her hands slid to his hips, and she pulled him closer. Her lips whispered in his ear. “Or your fiancée could strangle you for trying to smother her.”

But she grinned as she said it, and he chuckled. The last of his affronted stiffness vanished. He turned, winding his arms around her, nuzzling her cheek with his nose. “I can’t help it.”

“Things like the Blitz don’t come around often,” she said into his hair. A white lie of sorts; Shepard had been in plenty of situations more dangerous than a batarian invasion that didn’t make the news. “Believe me, I like getting shot at even less than you.”

Another white lie, because she enjoyed the adrenaline and fear tended to be something that happened to other people. But the sentiment was honest. Being injured sucked.

He tightened his embrace, his voice muffled. “Just… just hurry home. I miss you.”
After a bumpy shuttle flight out to Brazil, Shepard found an open seat in a supply truck headed to Villa Militar. As the Alliance’s premier training center for special operations, the base nestled into the jungle well outside city limits, deceptively unremarkable. If she didn’t know better, the gatehouse where they stopped to present their credentials would not have impressed her; as it was, she had firsthand experience in the difficulty of unauthorized access or egress. Scaling a near-vertical concrete retaining wall unassisted in the dark was an experience she’d be happy not to repeat.

From the road it was hard to get a sense of the size of the complex. It sprawled over thirty-five square kilometers, terraced to follow the foothills of the Brazilian highlands. Training officers loved to run recruits up and down the endless flights of concrete stairs until they quite literally fell over from exhaustion. Shepard’s calves twinged at the mere sight of them.

This was her first visit as an officer. It was nice to be spared the funny looks and occasional challenges as she walked to the barracks. Technically, enlisted were barred from N-division and admittance to ICT; Shepard had been recommended against better judgment by a former C.O., granted her N1 commission provisionally and given several years’ grace to qualify for officer training. Having that behind her felt good. Truth be told, spec ops was the only job she’d ever had much talent for, and the threat of losing the opportunity had hung over her future like an unwelcome cloud.

She dropped off her stuff and headed to Building G.

ICT’s combat simulator might be the most advanced such facility in the galaxy. While it was impossible to be certain what equipment the turians or salarians used, at the very least, it was in the same weight class. A dedicated AI brooded at the center of a wholly modern, state-of-the-art building to match. Shepard had rarely been inside a more pleasantly appointed navy facility.

She walked into an atrium full of glass and sunlight. The yeoman manning the desk stood as Shepard approached. “You have an appointment, ma’am?”

“Requalification,” Shepard said, wrinkling her nose as she pulled the sign-in datapad towards her. “Shepard.”

“I’ve got you right here.” She tapped away at the haptic keyboard, her fingertips dancing on the air. “They’re ready for you in Simulator 1.”

“Thanks.” She took the proffered visitor badge and headed down the hall.

Deeper into the building, the windows vanished- a concession to security- but the ceiling opened up to a full three stories. The computational power required to operate the combat simulators defied imagination. She made friends with a guy on the IT staff, who once took her into the AI core room. He explained that nearly six metric tons of river water ran through the tubes winding around the equipment, carrying away the excess heat. Nobody who’d witnessed the billows of steam pouring out of the building’s cooling tower had difficulty believing it.

Simulator 1’s control room bustled with technicians, fussing like mother hens over their assistant VIs. Towards the back, a few marines stood against the wall, waiting for their turn and trying to keep out of the way. One of them caught her attention. “Nath!”

“Lieutenant Laine, as I live and breathe.” She grinned as she sauntered over. They gripped hands briefly, a gesture of camaraderie. “They drag you into this shit pile, too?”

“You know it.” He nodded across the room. “Heard they’re running some kind of special program
in tandem. Osiris. Wanted to push everyone through at once to get the most data out of it.”

She followed his gaze, and saw another man getting outfitted in some kind of suit, covered head to toe in biometric sensors. He flexed as she watched, rotating arms and legs in the suit, checking its mobility. She frowned. “That’s not going to make this any easier.”

Laine rolled his eyes. “You’re always in the top scores, anyway. I doubt that rig will slow you down much.”

“Says the man who’s not still sore from the Blitz.” She didn’t put much edge into it. Laine had been on an op that read ‘inside batarian space’ to those who knew how to read between the lines, and she’d take the Blitz over that any day. That type got a little too cloak-and-dagger for her.

“Speaking of the Blitz, how’s the boy coping?” Laine asked.

As far as Shepard recalled, Laine had never referred to Todd by name. She crossed her arms. “The boy is not happy.”

“I’ll bet.” He snorted. “Good thing you met him after Aonia, yeah?”

He was right, and she didn’t like the implication, so she changed the subject, focusing on another bit of fallout from the Aonia mission. “How’s the new leg?”

Laine hiked up his pant leg until they could see the scar, circling his thigh just above the knee. Two years out, the amputation mark had faded to a pink welt. “I’m thinking of getting ‘Shepard’s Greatest Idea’ tattooed above it. What do you think?”

“It’s not like the grenade was part of the plan,” she protested. “And who the hell made sure you didn’t bleed out then and there, huh?”

“Dunno.” He rolled his pants back down. “I wasn’t awake for most of it, so for all I know you made that part up.”

Shepard was exasperated. “Oh, go to hell.”

Laine raised his eyebrows. “The boy ever ask why you’ve got a scar behind your ear that looks like someone sliced it clean off?”

Since that was pretty much exactly what had happened, Shepard hoped Todd never noticed. “I mostly wear my hair down around him.”

“Right.” He coughed. “Anyhow, the tech suit’s some gremlin design, and they don’t even wear armor so it can’t be that bad, mobility-wise.”

She cocked her head. “This data collection project’s run by SAMI?”

“Special Projects Division,” he confirmed with a grimace. Navy spec ops and Alliance intelligence networks had an infamous mutual disdain for each other. N-division thought the spies were a feckless pack of weasels; intel gremlins found the marines a bunch of dumb jarhead commandos. Laine pointed out one of the techs. “Came with their very own doc in tow. Name of Farrell.”

The doctor was middle-aged, with mouse-brown hair going to gray at the temples and already receding, more than a head shorter than Shepard and so thin she thought a stiff breeze might blow him away. He nattered about his computer equipment, ignoring them entirely.
Shepard disliked him instantly. Something about his fixated expression rubbed her all wrong.
“Did he mention what he’s after, or are we not entitled to even that much?”

Laine shrugged. “Something about improving VI routines for combat mechs. They want to incorporate movement and sensory data from real soldiers.”

She laughed. “And they don’t think their own guys are qualified?”

“Worse. They brought a few of them with. Guy they’re suiting up now is one. Doc called him Banes but I’m damned if he’s said a single word to us grunts.”

“Snobby.” She sighed and folded her arms. “It’s going to be long two weeks.”

The doctor finally introduced himself when her turn arrived, extending his hand. He had a crisp accent direct from Cambridge. “Jeffrey Farrell, Ministry of Intelligence. Our thanks for your cooperation.”

Shepard hadn’t volunteered, but the navy didn’t usually ask her permission for this sort of thing. “Let’s get started.”

“Down to business.” His smile was unnerving, feral, like a rat’s. His pinched gray eyes narrowed further as he grinned sharply. “I like that.”

She stared at him a few seconds longer than was comfortable. Things like her ate rats, but she wasn’t sure he’d yet figured that out. “Is your damn suit long enough for me?”

“We got your measurements from your records.” Again the smile. Navy hardsuits were custom-fit to each marine- they had to be, to fit well enough to all but live in for potentially weeks on end, and not cause needless injury or exhaustion from poor balance or awkward sizing.

That didn’t mean the idea of Farrell running his eyes over her measurements felt any less slimy. But she took the suit without a word, stripped off her utilities and climbed into it, the sensors cold and uncomfortable against her skin. She held still as Farrell and his minions connected them.

“What kind of data are you recording, exactly?”

“All the usual metrics. Movement speed and range. Blood pressure, nerve conduction, perspiration, eye movements, temperature…” He fit the cap over her head. “Also certain attributes of neural function. All anonymized, of course.”

“Of course.” Her tone suggested she didn’t believe him.

Farrell declined to offer reassurance. If anything, he seemed encouraged by her discomfort. “It’s the connection between brain and body that sets people like you apart. There’s harmony, yes, and other researchers have written extensively on that topic. They all missed the point entirely.”

“And you’re going to enlighten all of them.”

“Such charming sarcasm.” He plugged a datapad into her suit and checked the output. “The body is nothing without the brain, though there are tantalizing scraps of evidence that the brain can be something without the body-“

“You can’t possibly take any study that comes out of the Terminus seriously.” Shepard was the furthest thing from a scientist, but that particular experiment grabbed headlines across the galaxy through a seductive combination of ethical lapses and forbidden fruit.
Farrell shrugged, indifferent. “Every decision your body enacts begins in the brain. It’s how you process information, the unique organic structures and connections built by your experience, pathways that developed in ways divergent from how most of the population would respond- that’s the entire key.”

“To making better combat VIs?” Her voice was very dry. Farrell would probably sneer at VI.

He continued to make small adjustments to the rig. “I don’t suppose, Lieutenant Shepard, that I could convince you to donate your brain?”

She blinked, genuinely repulsed. “What?”

“Posthumously, of course.” Another sharp, fleeting smile. “Its sectioning could prove quite illuminating.”

“Keep it up, doc,” she said, evenly, refusing to let him see her skin crawl. “I wouldn’t count on outliving me to get a look.”

He glanced at her face, and his expression soured. “You can fit your standard equipment over the suit, and fight as normal. We’ll incorporate this data with the other pieces tracked by the simulator.”

He pinched the fabric over her breast to adjust the lay of the cloth without warning or permission. Her arm twitched with the impulse to slap his hands away. It was a relief to pull her hardsuit over the rig and head to the simulator.

Once the hatch closed and left her alone in the cold and silence, waiting for the exercise to cue up, Farrell’s invasiveness dropped away from her mind. A calm anticipation spread through her. This was where she lived, in the fight, and in simulated combat there was no price in scars or life to be paid. Here, she forgot everything else.

As Laine predicted, Shepard did well, and continued a history of high performance as the qualification dragged on over the next two weeks. Farrell and his minions dogged their every step. With the air of lepidopterists, they pulled on nitrile gloves and delicately bagged her rifle at the end of her shooting trial, presumably to recover its firing records. She completed her PT tests with five pieces of data collection equipment strapped to her chest and limbs. She had to shoo the researchers out of the exam room where one of the Villa’s doctors evaluated her condition, probed her with questions about the past year, and filled several vials with blood.

But the final straw came late one night when Shepard awoke to answer nature’s call and found one of Farrell’s men parked outside her doorway. The resulting shouting match drew out several other marines, Laine among them, who only narrowly prevented Shepard attacking the man when he claimed to be within his rights.

Laine restrained her while the others chased him off. “Calm the fuck down.”

“I’m going to complain to Zahavy,” she swore, fervently. “March up the hill and wake him up. Make him explain this bullshit.”

“You are not waking Admiral Zahavy.”

“Did you have a gremlin lurking under your window with a clipboard?”

“Pretty sure anyone else lurking nearby ran out when they heard you yelling.” Laine let her go at last, the researcher long gone. “It’s creepy as hell, but he wasn’t hurting anything.”
“You would say that.” She crossed her arms, a dark glare fixed on her face as she stared down the path where the man had run off. “What do they want with us? This sure as fuck isn’t a damn VI improvement program.”

“We’ve got three days left.” Laine tugged her arm. “Then we’ll never see these fucks again. Go back to bed.”

After a long moment, she let him persuade her, though she didn’t sleep well until she was back on Mars.
Kaidan Alenko stared down into bathroom sink and tried to remember why he came into that room.

He contemplated the objects ringing the basin. A plastic cup, but he didn’t feel thirsty. Toothbrush. He ran his tongue over his teeth; he thought they were clean, but couldn’t remember the last time they were brushed. He picked it up to use it just in case, realized the toothpaste was empty, and experienced a moment of the vaguest déjà vu. His thoughts were in a haze, the mental equivalent of not seeing his hand in front of his face, thick and colorless and deadening all sound.

Too much sleep or too little. Not having enough to do, bored on leave. That’s all. Still, groggy as he was, he decided he better make a note about the toothpaste. So he opened his omni-tool. “Add toothpaste to the list.”

A message flashed on the screen. “Toothpaste is already on your shopping list. Increase quantity?”

“No,” he said after a moment, disconcerted. He closed his omni-tool. Stared into the mirror. Why was he in the bathroom?

The light pulsed, once. A flat generic voice, the building VI, came from the ceiling. “Lieutenant Alenko, you have guests.”

His first thought was DMHS sent someone in person. He’d been dodging their calls since he left the Agincourt. But it hadn’t even been two weeks- no reason to escalate that quickly.

A thudding sound, a fist pounding on his hatch. His brow furrowed. “You let them in the building?”

“One of them is an officer with Citadel Security.”

“C-Sec? Why—” Then it came to him. “Crap.”

The pounding intensified. There was muffled shouting, maybe his name. Alenko shut his eyes a long moment. Then he stalked into the common room and slapped the control to open the hatch.

Matsuo Noguchi stood glowering in his doorway.

That wasn’t who he expected. Alenko blinked. “What—”

“Is something wrong with your omni-tool?” Mat demanded.

A wave of tiredness sunk into his bones. “I can’t do this right now.”

Mat went on, with a refreshing lack of need for Alenko’s input. “Let me tell you a story.”

He sighed and leaned his forehead into the doorframe. “Mat—”

“I had this good friend, see. Known the man since college. Made him one of my daughter’s godparents, we were that close.”
“He got shot down in the freaking Terminus last summer and stranded for a month, and when he got back, I got an email. Exactly two words. ‘I’m alive.’” Mat crossed his arms. “All subsequent attempts at communication were soundly ignored.”

Alenko rolled his head to look at him. “How did you convince C-Sec to let you into the building?”

“I let him in,” said a familiar voice— one flanged by turian mandibles, belonging to the person Alenko did expect. Garrus Vakarian walked into view. “You didn’t even notice me here, did you.”

He made a noise of disgust. “Of course you know each other, somehow.”

That was how his life had gone since June. One thing after another, all downhill.

Mat’s indignation continued unabated. “After the twelfth unanswered email, I got the idea to check where the fuck you were. Because maybe it was somewhere you actually couldn’t contact civilization and thus you weren’t being a total jackass.”

Alenko bristled. “Who gave you the right—“

“And what do I find? Said jackass is aboard the Citadel, doing who-knows what—“ Mat paused. “What in god’s name are you wearing?”

He looked down reflexively, at his stained undershirt and cargo pants filched from his utilities and bare dirty feet. All of it was filthy beyond any acceptable excuse. “I haven’t had a moment to do laundry.”

A bold-faced lie. Mat’s eyes narrowed. “Or shave.”

So that was why he was in the bathroom.

“Your friend here came into C-Sec to request a wellness check,” Garrus interrupted, sauntering towards them. “The officer who took the report is a friend. Recognized your name, and brought me in. I hoped this was a fool’s errand.”

“I don’t need checking on.” His irritation colored every word. The constant stream of calls from DMHS was getting to him. “What I need is everyone to get off my back. So if you’ll excuse me—”

Garrus shouldered him aside and entered the apartment, Mat close at his heels. Then stopped short only a few paces into the room.

The three men stared, the first two in a nameless horror, the third in a certain amount of mortification. Mat spoke first. “What the hell, Kaidan.”

Alenko’s ears reddened. He licked his lips, muttered. “I haven’t had much time at home.”

He followed them inside, because there didn’t seem much else to do about it. In his embarrassment he barely registered the hatch closing. Garrus and Mat looked from him to the room, speechless.

Alenko dug out his foam bedroll and a thin navy blanket, but hadn’t bothered to move his sleeping accommodations from the main living area. He didn’t have much in the way of belongings from the Agincourt, and hadn’t bothered to have any of his things shipped from storage. It didn’t seem
necessary to spread these meager items throughout the apartment. A paper sack sat near the makeshift bed, bursting at the seams with the balled-up remnants of other sacks and waxed-paper packaging from his steady diet of fast food.

The sparseness of furnishing served only to underscore the shabby emptiness of the too-large apartment, and lend it a deeper sense of vacancy than if it were actually unoccupied. This was not a place anyone went home. It was a place inhabited by a squatter.

“It was an unfurnished apartment,” he said into the growing silence. “There wasn’t time after… after the funeral, to find anything, and I haven’t been in port long. I made do.”

“Oh, come on. I was never that bad.”

“Man, you used to iron your jeans.”

“I haven’t bought an iron yet.” The excuse was lame, even to his ears.

Mat wrinkled his nose. “Or a hamper. Or laundry detergent, apparently, or dishwasher liquid—”

“You used to get all pearl-clutchy if I left a sock on the floor, but ok.”

“Alright,” said Garrus. “When’s the last time you ate?”

Alenko considered this. No non-incriminating answer presented itself. “I had tea this morning?”

“Shit.” He rubbed his face. “You make some more tea. I’ll order take-out.”

He made one last weak attempt to lodge a protest. “You don’t have to stay. I’m just a little short on energy lately.”

Mat pointed. “The kitchen’s through here?”

“Alright.” He hurried to the sink and tried, with increasing futility, to tidy up. “I’m adjusting. I don’t need an- an intervention, or whatever the hell this is supposed to be.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Mat crossed his arms, actually angry now. “Because I think you’re talking to the guy who’d known you barely three months when he found you face-down in our dorm room—”

“-and sat with you in the hospital for two damn days afterwards.” He shoved Alenko out of the way, then seized one of the containers and slammed it into the sink, slapping on the faucet. His voice rose. “For the last time, that was an accident. I wasn’t trying to—”

“And sat with you in the hospital for two damn days afterwards.” He shoved Alenko out of the way, then seized one of the containers and slammed it into the sink, slapping on the faucet. That accusation hung in the air, as Mat rinsed the muck down the drain in offended silence, and Kaidan tried to cobble a response. He wanted to say that was a long time ago and point out that the
circumstances were completely different - both true, and both seemingly irrelevant to Mat.

He wondered for a moment just how bad this must look for Mat to be this upset. It didn’t seem so awful to him - some loose garbage, a little behind on the laundry, no opportunity to find furniture yet. And so what if he was behind on his emails as well? He didn’t owe anyone an email.

In the end, he simply filled two mugs as Mat finished cleaning them and put them in the microwave to heat. He’d amassed a small collection. Getting more cups delivered was easier than washing them.

Garrus came into the kitchen. “Take-out’s on the way. This looks one step up from eating condiment packets so I got a bunch of everything.”

Alenko’s head began to throb. Not an implant headache, thank god - just a run-of-the-mill, skull-full-of-cobwebs ache. All he wanted was both of them to go away, so he could go back to sleep and hope things would somehow be different tomorrow, without any real expectation of this being so.

The microwave beeped. Mat found the mostly-empty carton of tea, and dumped a bag in each of the mugs.

Garrus folded his arms and leaned against the wall while they waited for it to steep. “I hadn’t heard you were back aboard the station, either.”

That was a barb. Alenko swirled his tea, as if that would make it steep any faster. As if it would get them out of his apartment any quicker.

“I have to say I’m surprised,” he went on. “Seeing as you shot out of here the first chance your navy let you back on a ship. Didn’t expect to see you for half a year at least.”

It had been not quite two months. He toyed with the bag some more, embarrassed, without looking up. “Yeah, me neither.”

Garrus frowned. Before he could ask the question, Alenko cleared his throat. “Can I get you some water, or something?”

Because of course, Garrus, a turian, could not drink levo-amino tea. Not without incurring one hell of a stomachache. Garrus glanced at the slowly-shrinking trash pile, and the fouled sink. “No thanks.”

The tea was ready. He picked up the mug again, set it down, steeled himself, faced them with the friendliest expression he could muster. “Look, I’ll go furniture shopping tomorrow if it’ll make you any happier. I’m just tired right now. A little sleep, and I’ll be a new man.”

“How much sleep are you getting?” Mat asked, a little more sharply than he’d hoped.

“Enough.” Alenko took his tea out to the living room.

Such as it was, anyway. He sat cross-legged on the blanket serving as his sleeping bag. Garrus elected to take up station against a new wall, while Mat opted for the floor. That sparked his irritation. The blanket wasn’t that dirty. Just a little greasy in places, maybe. Nothing to be ashamed of.

They were handling him with kid gloves, acting as you would around a severely injured person. It rankled. “I don’t know what you expect me to say.”
“We’re just having dinner,” said Garrus.

Right on cue, the apartment VI announced, “Lieutenant Alenko, your food delivery drone is at the door.”

Garrus stirred. “I’ve got it.”

“It’s my damn house,” said Alenko, frustration with this whole situation boiling over at last, and stalked to the door.

He paid the drone and brought the bag inside, heavy with the scent of fried rice and steamed dumplings. To his chagrin, he found he really couldn’t remember the last time he ate more than a cup of tea or a spoonful of peanut butter. Yesterday dinner? Or was it breakfast? Did it matter?

They laid out the food across the floorboards. Garrus took a single plastic package containing unrecognizable vegetables and a weirdly scented sauce. Mat, reverting to his college days, claimed the noodles and began eating directly from the take-out box- a habit Alenko found he still couldn’t stand. He half-heartedly filled one of the provided paper plates and immediately set it aside.

“I’m fine,” he said, for what felt like the millionth time. “It was nice of you to stop by, but-“

Garrus swallowed his latest bite and looked at him pointedly. “Let’s cut to the chase. This is about Shepard. I get it-“

“Do you?” he asked, acidly.

Garrus ignored him. “You loved her, and she died. But this isn’t love. This is self-destruction.”

“I left her on that ship.” That wasn’t what he’d meant to say. His mouth snapped shut.

“No, you didn’t.” Garrus held up a hand at his inevitable protest. “Hear me out. We both know what she was like.”

That rubbed him wrong. He was so tired of hearing about Shepard-the-stubborn-marine, who didn’t know when to quit, when that had shit to do with anything. She quite literally could not leave the ship while anyone was still aboard- her psychology wouldn’t allow it. It was his job to drag her off it, kicking and screaming if necessary, because he was the only person there who knew that about her.

Alenko said nothing.

“She’d want you to live,” Garrus said, trying again. “How would she feel, if she knew she threw her life away for nothing?”

_For nothing._ For a moment he was struck speechless, breathless, sitting on the shores of Virmire and hearing Nathaly scream her grief and rage- _Nothing? It was for nothing?!_

Garrus had been the one to tell Nathaly that Ashley had died. The choice of phrase had had to be deliberate. Anger flashed through Alenko, and his eyes cut to him. “Go to hell. You weren’t there. You have no goddamn idea what she’d want.”

Mat put down his noodles. “He’s not wrong.”

“Is this dinner or a séance?” Alenko got to his feet and began throwing other pieces of detritus into the empty delivery bag, so angry he was almost shaking. He needed to move. The garbage
gave him somewhere to focus his attention.

“I don’t mean about Shepard.” Mat grew testy. “I only met her the once. I don’t know her wants, and to be honest, I don’t give a shit about her feelings. This is self-destructive. And it’s just plain fucking sad.”

Alenko blinked at him. Mat stared up at him from the floor, furious in his own right, and pushed his glasses back up his nose. Then he reached again for the noodles. “I know I can’t make you want to save yourself. But I bet I can guilt you into doing it anyway.”

Alenko let the bag fall to the side. Eventually he spoke. “I don’t know what she’d want either. And all I want is to sleep.”

Because if he slept long enough, maybe he’d wake up in a world where this wasn’t happening.

“So go home to Canada and sleep.” Mat shrugged, and dug his chopsticks into the box. “It fits your goals, right? Think of how much more sleep you’ll get with someone else fixing your meals and washing your clothes.”

Mat was well-acquainted with his mother’s tendency to fuss. The thought only made Alenko more exhausted. “I don’t want to deal with their questions.”

“Your friend’s right,” Garrus said, coming to the end of a long thought. “Look, maybe I don’t know what Shepard would tell you. But I know what she was to you.”

He heaved a sigh. “Just stop-“

Garrus continued undeterred, in the same quiet tone. “She was family. Maybe you need to be with the family you still have.”

“That’s not going to help.” But it rang false even to his ears.

“It’s not the same, but I was still in school when my mom got sick. My sister can be a pest, and spirits know my dad and I don’t always see eye-to-eye. But the truth is, they’re the only thing that’s made watching her get worse even a little bearable.” Garrus watched him steadily, and shrugged. “What do you have to lose by going home?”

His reply was feeble at best. “I don’t know what I’d say.”

Mat gave him a very pointed look. “It’s Thanksgiving. If you’re on leave, you go home and eat some goddamn turkey with your family. It’s the rules.”

That shocked him. Alenko had lost all track of the calendar. “It can’t be Thanksgiving already.”

Garrus frowned. “Thanksgiving?”

“UNAS holiday.” Mat chewed and swallowed, and went for another bite. “Four days from now. At least in the Canadian parts.”

Alenko lowered his forehead into his hands and groaned.

“Even sleeping sixteen hours a day and rending your garments the other eight, you know it’ll make your mom happy to see you.” Mat gave the screw another twist. “And just think how she’ll feel when she finds out you could’ve come home, and didn’t.”

His head snapped up. “You wouldn’t.”
He raised the noodle-laden chopsticks in a kind of mocking salute. “I absolutely would.”

“You’re a terrible excuse for a human being.”

“With charm like that, it’s not surprising you sweet-talked your C.O. out of her pants.” Mat patted the floor beside him. “Now you’re going to come back here. You’ll eat your food. Then you’ll buy a shuttle ticket and call your dad, just like a grown-up. Ok?”

There seemed no getting out of it. Alenko dragged himself back to the food and sat. “Ok.”

As he began, reluctantly, to pick at his dinner, Mat continued. “And I’m going to need temporary access to your apartment.”

The chicken was a lumpy paste in his mouth. He forced himself to swallow. “Why?”

“Just look at it.” He gestured with his free hand, indicated the entire space. “This is bleak. It would have anyone climbing the walls.”

Garrus caught on to Mat’s suggestion. “Wouldn’t take much to make it livable. A couple pieces of furniture, maybe some dishes. A houseplant if we’re being really ambitious.”

“It’s not just…” Alenko looked away, distracting himself studying the way the pile of laundry had slipped around the corner of the hallway, like a slow-moving glacier, pushing aside his boots and eroding into the jumble of his hardsuit. “I don’t want to stay here but I can’t leave.”

Mat blinked. “Kaidan, I’ve lived aboard the Citadel for years now. This is a fantastic apartment, or could be, if it wasn’t inhabited by a hermit. How could you not want to stay here?”

“Nathaly wanted a bathtub,” he said vacantly. “That’s why it’s nice. You don’t get those in studios.”

Garrus and Mat exchanged a look. After a long moment, Mat asked, “Do you want to leave, or do you feel like you should leave?”

It was just an apartment. Nothing special. But he had nothing left of her. A jacket and a flag and bunch of digital pictures, sitting invisible in cloud storage. At least they’d shared this, a kind of common dream, even if it never became reality.

She was so excited to live here. His throat closed up. All he could manage was to shake his head.

Garrus said, “Give us the week you’re with your parents. It’ll become a place someone actually wants to live.”

Seeing Alenko’s dubious look, Mat added, “I’ll make Alex help. Eat your food.”

Alenko picked up the plate. The food was growing cold, but after a while, he managed to get most of it down.

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The skycar slid silently through the gray Vancouver streets, a spattering of rain lashing at the canopy and bright autumn leaves trailing behind in concertina spirals. Once they left the vicinity of the spaceport, traffic all but disappeared. It was the type of cold autumn day that sent people scuttling indoors in search of a hot mug of cider. Even the squirrels stayed huddled in their trees.

It reminded Alenko of another gray October day, twenty-three years ago, when Conatix men
materialized at his house and took him away to Jump Zero. Same vague sense of impending doom. Same helplessness.

Tom Alenko steered the car with a careless ease that belied the discomfort pervading the cabin. Kaidan sat beside his father with his one small bag on his lap. He managed to clean himself up by some small fraction, and collect a pair of jeans and a sweater in order to look human, but putting the same effort into his father’s halting attempts at conversation was beyond him.

Not that his reticence had stopped his father trying. “I was surprised when you called. We assumed with the new post, you wouldn’t have any leave for a while.”

Tom made no mention of Kaidan’s failure to visit after being rescued from the *Normandy* wreckage, nor the way he ignored their offers to come see him aboard the Citadel instead. The absence was honestly worse than the argument would have been. Like the air devoured the words before they could be spoken and left a hungry silence behind.

Kaidan forced himself to reply. “Yeah. Me too.”

Tom waited a moment in case he had anything further to say on the subject. “Well, we’re glad to have you home.”

Sometimes, lying awake at night because he’d spent the whole day sleeping, Kaidan would stare at the ceiling above his bedroll and imagine Nathaly in the apartment, running the bath, cursing as she dropped a spoon in the kitchen, leaving her boots and jacket in an untidy pile by the door. Filling the place with her presence until the walls themselves saturated with her scent and her voice.

That was the home he thought he was creating, right up until the ship exploded, and still the only one he really wanted. This was just a place his parents lived.

His father said something. Alenko brought himself back to the car. “What?”

“I said, your mom’s making tom kha gai.” Tom glanced over at him. “You were far away for a minute there.”

He straightened in his seat and tried to be less of an automaton. “Sorry. Tired.”

Tom frowned. Alenko tried again. “Mom makes the best soup. Can’t get anything like it, even on the Citadel.”

Tom’s mouth thinned, but he decided not to push. “She couldn’t cook a lick when I met her, you know. Her father told her she’d never catch a husband unless she learned.”

Alenko had heard this story before. His father would tell it loudly whenever family was around, and his mother would swat him, pretending irritation but secretly pleased. He knew the next words by heart.

Indeed, Tom gave the windshield a smug smile, and steered the car towards a Vancouver high-rise, just one street back from the harbor. They set down lightly on the balcony, the skycar canopy lifting automatically as the engine powered off.

As Tom stepped out, he said, “Apparently, I was the first man she thought might be worth the effort.”

Standing at the open door just out of the rain, Nimura Alenko caught the tail end of the story, as
Kaidan was sure his father intended. She crossed her arms. “Apparently, someone forgot I didn’t start trying to learn until I had Kaidan.”

That was how the story always ended, but there was a quiet tension underlying the familiar exchange that robbed it of its comfort. She came out into the weather and gave him a tight hug—one of those where she was trying so hard not to cling that her hands gathered up wads of his shirt to avoid digging into his back.

Guilt flooded him. He folded his arms around her. She was tiny as a bird, and Alenko had inherited his father’s western stature. “Hi, mom.”

She held on a moment longer, then drew back and looked up into his face, studying him for a long moment with warm brown eyes as anxious as his father’s. Though nearing fifty-seven, her age showed only in the worry lines gathered at the corners of her mouth, and the way things seemed to settle heavy on her shoulders, sometimes. Nimura was a very giving person; more than once his father had joked that she’d hand a stranger the shoes off her feet. In her eyes, everything was her problem, something for her to remedy.

But she let him go without a word. “Dinner’s ready. Go get washed up.”

Alenko dropped his knapsack in the guest room before proceeding to the bath. He took his time, scrubbing his hands, rinsing his face, smoothing his hair. It did nothing to reduce the permanent pall that shadowed his every expression. He looked tired. Like he’d aged five years in the past one. Small wonder his parents were worried.

He toweled away every last drop until he had no excuses left and went into the kitchen.

His parents’ condo was not his childhood home. That residence, a modest house in suburban Vancouver, was sold not long after he left for college, to the profound relief to all three of them. That was where his parents spent nine years in the shadow of their absent child, and the place Kaidan had dreamed about so fervently aboard Jump Zero that when he finally did come home, the reality could never live up to his imagination. Better to have it in the past.

This two-bedroom apartment was well-suited to empty-nesters. It sat on the 52nd floor, about two-thirds of the way up their building, with a balcony car port and a modest view of the water. Decorated in a style a good fifteen years out-of-date, it had a certain pristine fussiness that suggested a child had never stepped foot inside. Alenko knew that was not exactly true—his cousin’s family were not infrequent guests when they came into the city—but Nimura was meticulous in her cleaning.

His mother was sprinkling fish sauce into the soup pot. As if reading his thoughts, she said, “You decided to come home so late, your aunt and uncle already made plans to go with Kyle to Amy’s family for the holiday.”

Kyle was his only cousin, and Amy his wife. Since their daughters were born, holidays had become very contentious. Alenko was just as glad to have missed that particular family dispute. “That’s fine.”

“I know they would have liked to see you.”

“I wasn’t expecting them to change their plans.” In truth, he didn’t want to see them, didn’t want to have to perform for even one more person. His omnipresent guilt ticked up another notch.

His mother pursed her lips and held out a spoon. “It’s missing something.”
He obligingly took the spoon and sampled the soup. It didn’t taste like anything to him. Food couldn’t hold his attention anymore, and he never seemed to get hungry. “It needs cilantro.”

If nothing else, growing up with a Thai mother had taught him more cilantro was never the wrong answer. She nodded. “It’s going in the bowls. Tom?”

His father poked his head in from the dining room, where he’d been setting the table. Nimura asked, “Can you get me more cilantro?”

He nodded, and headed to the balcony, where she had a small herb garden. Meanwhile, she ladled out the soup. To Kaidan, she said, “I’ve got a salad in the fridge.”

He retrieved it automatically, found the salad tongs, and carried it to the table. His father came back in with the cilantro, and over the sounds of chopping he could hear a whispered conversation. Though he couldn’t make out the words, it wasn’t hard to guess the subject. He tossed the salad with the dressing and tried to put it out of his mind.

They all sat down to dinner. The rain had come in earnest now, drumming down onto the balcony and coating the sliding glass door in a film. It made the cityscape beyond look like a watercolor, shapes and lights running together. Kaidan was incongruously reminded of the lagoon on Virmire, Normandy crew and salarian STG alike huddled in the leaky canvas tents, watching the sky pour down through plastic window patches. Nathaly pacing in the tight confines like a caged tiger.

Standing in the surf after the rain had passed with her pressed warm and tired against his side. His arm tucked around her shoulders and hers about his waist. Her hair tickling his cheek.

His spoon skated through the soup aimlessly. Toying with it really, watching the chicken play peek-a-boo with the bright leaves.

“So,” Nimura said brightly, once everyone had filled their plates with salad and steaming rice, “How do you like your new ship?”

“It’s not as modern as the Normandy,” he replied, flat, colorless. He took a bite just to occupy his mouth.

His mother noticed, and pursed her lips again. Home-cooked meals were one of the things her son missed the most on a deployment. Tom attempted to open up the conversation. “They said after the attack on the Citadel that the station would have fallen without the Normandy.”

“I wouldn’t know. I was on the ground.”

His father fumbled his spoon. “On the ground?”

Alenko took a moment to re-engage his brain. His parental filter was offline. Ordinarily, he did his best to avoid causing them distress. They’d never been particularly happy about this choice of career. He’d never been particularly proud of how much it worried them. “Yeah. We were dropped onto the Presidium to deal with Saren.”

No need to tell them it was just three people. No need to explain about Ilos or the conduit, either. His father still looked rather astonished. “I imagine that was quite a battle.”

Tom had been a navy programmer, and so far as Alenko knew never had cause to fire his gun after basic training. He poked at his food. “It wasn’t that bad.”

The simple lie didn’t work, though his mother, he noticed, didn’t seem shocked- only concerned.
His dad was the one staring open-mouthed. He tried to pick out some details that wouldn’t be too alarming. “The, uh, the tank landed upside-down. Nathaly hit her head pretty hard so that was a little hairy.”

“Nathaly?” his mother asked.

The name had slithered out with no warning. It left a taste of acid on his tongue. He licked his lips and forced himself to continue without the slightest change in tone. “My commander. That was her name. Nathaly Shepard.”

“Of course,” Nimura said. “I don’t know why I never thought of her having a first name.”

Nathaly hated that people saw her as a spectre first and a person second, though she pretended otherwise. Alenko stared down into his bowl.

“Yeah,” he said. “A lot of people forget that.”

“The tank flipped over?” Tom asked.

He looked up. “This is why I don’t tell you stories from work.”

His parents exchanged a glance. Tom leaned forward on his elbow and scooped up another forkful of salad. “This came out well. I don’t know where you got good papayas in October.”

“I thought something light,” Nimura said after a moment. “Since we’re having such a big meal tomorrow.”

Alenko’s mind wandered off again as his parents made small talk. Six months ago the Normandy crew attended the Systems Alliance birthday ball on Arcturus. Nathaly didn’t like meat at the best of times, but after the business on Terra Nova, the memories Balak stirred up, she was barely able to bring herself to attempt the catered chicken. He watched her swallow a morsel, the grimace she couldn’t quite hide, and offered to trade his vegetables. He could still remember the smile of relief that flickered across her mouth with the kind of clarity he couldn’t summon to recall the last ten minutes.

He missed taking care of her in little ways like that. Nathaly was incredibly self-reliant, and without fail surprised when he did. He thought sometimes he might have been the first person in her entire adult life to try.

Alenko pushed his chair back from the table, interrupting the conversation. “I’m not very hungry. I think I’m going to turn in early.”

Before they could object, he retreated to the guest bedroom and shut the door behind him. Alenko leaned against it for a long moment and shut his eyes. Coming here was a terrible idea. His parents would continue to dig, and worry, and be hurt when he didn’t respond to either. Their concern was deeply unwelcome. All Alenko wanted out of other people the last few months was to be left alone. Was that so damn hard?

Down the hall, his parents had resumed their troubled discussion. Alenko stretched out on the bed, laced his fingers behind his head, and stared blankly at the ceiling.

He knew how it looked. There was no explaining what happened with Farrell back on Chasca. It was Vyrnnus all over again, only this time, he didn’t have the excuse of youthful inexperience. Part of being a marine was keeping a firm rein on his emotions. Without that, he was just another
unhinged biotic, dangerous and useless. It made him sick to think about.

He couldn’t avoid DMHS forever. When he finally went in, they’d discharge him. It was what he deserved.

Occasionally he still got emails or messages from the surviving Normandy crew, frequently at first, less so now. He never answered. He didn’t know how he could, not when so many of them hadn’t made it. That was on him. Nathaly ordered him to evacuate the ship—dependent on him to save them if she couldn’t. Every person they’d left up there and everyone who died on the surface was on his shoulders, including her. Especially her. Eventually, most of the crew stopped attempting contact.

He stared at the ceiling, and thought about the people lying dead amid the flames aboard the Normandy, Talitha Draven’s screams when they found Rosamund’s shuttle, Addison Chase’s final breath, Nathaly floating frozen in the dark, until sleep took him at last.

Alenko woke late Thanksgiving morning full of dread. He used to daydream about taking Nathaly home for this holiday, introduce her to his family, show her around his home, maybe—maybe—convince her Earth wasn’t particularly wretched as planets went. She was a true child of space and preferred living in a climate-controlled thermos to out in the wind and dirt. He’d imagined it so many times the day felt haunted.

By the time he climbed out of bed, the scent of roasting turkey filled the condo. He could hear his mother bustling around the dining room, while the first game of the day was getting started on their vid terminal.

He padded out into the living space. His mother was arranging an honest-to-god cornucopia on the table, with cheese and fruit pouring out of the wicker. Alenko was astonished to actually feel surprised.

She caught his stare and lifted her chin. “It’s festive.”

“We already went through it when she bought the damn thing,” Tom said, not looking away from the game.

“It looks like Thanksgiving,” he admitted, and his mother smiled, for the first time since he got home.

They spent the better part of the middle of the day relaxing, Tom alternatively cursing and cheering the game, Kaidan pretending to follow along without being able to muster much spirit for it, Nimura reading a book and enjoying the presence of her family. If things were a bit strained, they seemed to have collectively agreed to ignore it.

For a few hours he felt calm, if not precisely normal. Thanksgiving was enough of a ritual to not require much of an act.

Then the game ended, and the coverage cut to the news. Anderson’s face appeared in a corner of the screen, giving some kind of press conference, while the reporter spoke over the vid. “Earlier today, Councilor Anderson once again put forward a motion that all species contribute to a galactic defense force in preparation for a hypothetical future war, as he has at every Council security session since taking office.”

Anderson’s face filled the screen, his voice as somber as always. His hands gripped the podium.
“Sadly, the reaper threat is very real. And the fight against Sovereign proves we’re nowhere near equipped to defend against the coming invasion.”

Back in the Alenkos’ living room, Tom sat back on the couch. “We finally get a seat on the Council, and end up stuck with this guy.”

Kaidan stirred. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Both of his parents gave him startled looks. It was the most words he’d said at one time in the past two days. Tom cleared his throat. “There are still a lot of unanswered questions from the war, but this…”

He started to respond, but the newscast pre-empted him. The reporter talking in the same placid tones she’d use for the fall foliage, or the recent rain. “The so-called reaper theory originated with the late Commander Shepard, who maintained that the geth dreadnought, Sovereign, was a vanguard of an unknown race of super-machines.”

The screen cut to old footage of her funeral. His mouth went dry.

“I know she was a friend of yours,” Tom said. “But you have to admit, that’s just flat-out crazy.”

The reporter carried on. “Shepard passed away earlier this year during a geth assault, her theory still unproven.”

The camera panned over the arrayed chairs, the backs of the guests in their suits and uniforms, the empty coffin. Alenko could feel himself sitting there, sick, shaking, Liara’s hand clutching his as the world shrank around them.

A minute or an eternity later, they cut back to the station desk. The reporter’s co-host chimed in. “Shepard’s heroism is undeniable, but she was also instrumental in appointing David Anderson to the councilor’s seat.”

They began to debate her influence over Anderson. His father gestured at the screen. “See, this is exactly what I’m talking about- Kaidan?”

Alenko found he couldn’t speak.

I can’t do this, he thought, fighting back a rising panic. I can’t sit here and be ok, I can’t, I can’t-

His father was growing more concerned. His voice rose. “Dammit, Kaidan, you need to tell us what’s going on.”

“Tom,” his mother chided.

Trapped in this stuffy room with their smothering anxiety was more than he could bear. He stumbled to his feet.

His mother stood up, alarmed now herself. “Where are you going?”

“Out,” he said, shortly, not trusting himself to say more, not sure he could actually be more specific.

“At least let me get you a coat-“

But he was already in the hall and fleeing to the elevator.
Vancouver’s streets were all but abandoned, nearly everyone home for the holiday, even people who’d celebrated earlier in the weekend. It was another gray and dreary day, touched by autumn chill. Alenko stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and hunched his shoulders against the wind, walking briskly anywhere but back to that condo.

He walked until he couldn’t feel his face anymore, past closed-up shops and rows of empty cars, and came to a lone bar still doing business. The only people inside were the bartender half-asleep and a homeless man hunched up in the corner.

The bartender woke up marginally as he sat on a stool, enough to pour him a beer, before settling back down with his face in his hand. The small vid terminal tucked into a corner thankfully turned to something banal, innocuous.

Alenko told himself he’d just warm up, and be on his way. His mother would be both livid and heartbroken if didn’t return for dinner. Then one beer became two and a half, ten minutes became three hours, and he admitted he didn’t want to go back. Maybe couldn’t go back- couldn’t sit there eating turkey and pretending everything was fine, when this was furthest from fine life could get.

The door to the bar swung open and shed ruddy sundown light across the floor, scattering through his half-drunk pint. The bartender continued to snore softly. Alenko turned, shielding his eyes. Then he groaned.

His father stepped into the room. Kaidan turned back to the bar and swallowed the last of his beer in one long draught. “How?”

“Extranet search for places open in our neighborhood. This is further than I expected.” Tom took the stool next to his, in no particular hurry. “You’re missing dinner.”

Alenko eyed him. There wasn’t a trace of lingering anger. Just patience, with a thread of disappointment. He laid his hands on the bar top and looked away, fingers picking at the peeling stain. Whoever last restored this bar slathered it on like paint. It was soft and tacky, motes of dust rubbed into it. Just completely wrong in every way.

Tom picked up the pair of glasses sitting at his elbow. “Going through a lot of these lately?”

Discovering he could get alcohol delivered aboard the Citadel was a strategic error. His face flushed, which was answer enough.

“What is this?” Tom asked without preamble, abandoning any pretense. “Kaidan, I’m worried, you’ve got your mother scared to death… I promise you, whatever this is about, it’ll be easier if you get it off your chest. Please tell me what’s going on.”

“Coming home was a mistake. I’m sorry. You and mom don’t need this.”

Tom hesitated. “You should know, after you called, I got on an extranet site for friends and family of the Agincourt crew and I know the ship isn’t in port.”

Alenko’s stomach clenched up. His father continued, in a steady tone that was neither harsh nor conceding. “There’s not a chance they would have given you a lengthy leave so soon after being reassigned. So what is this? I haven’t seen you act this way since you got home from BAA t.”

He hunched down further, feeling small. “I don't want to talk.”
“Alright,” Tom said, defeated. He turned his attention to his omni-tool. “You know we're always here if you change your mind.”

They sat like that, in silence, for five minutes, then ten. Tom clearly wasn’t leaving. His father's concern hadn't disappeared, but there wasn't much tension in him. He understood his son's stubbornness.

Alenko willed himself to swallow this sick, sad feeling. Just for a few hours, and then catch an early shuttle away from here. Just get through one lousy dinner. He’d kept Nathaly to himself because he wanted the situation properly squared away before introducing her to his family. Now he didn't see why he should mention anything, after how it ended.

But the grief was a poison brewing inside him. Sitting there at the bar, it finally reached lethal dosage and spilled out his mouth.

“I left Nathaly on the ship.” He hadn’t meant to speak. But his lips kept moving without him. “As soon as I realized the Normandy was going down, I went to find her. There was so much fire.”

His father was nonplussed. “What are you talking about?”

He stared at the stupid wooden bar with its stupid peeling varnish. Dug in his fingernails. But it couldn’t stop the tide of words. “I knew she’d never get on a shuttle on her own. She couldn’t leave her crew behind. And I just… left her there.”

Kaidan took a shaky, ragged breath. “I don’t know what happened after that. She never made it to the ground. I don’t know if it hurt, or if it was quick, or if she stayed up there in the wreck for days, injured and in pain and waiting to die-“

He forced his mouth to close with an effort of will, stopping the stream of words, because he was approaching hysterical and he had no idea what would happen when he arrived.

Tom made another attempt, beyond confused, but trying anyway. “You can’t dwell on things like that. Death is always ugly, but she died a hero, doing what was right. I didn’t mean to insult her back home, if that’s what you thought.”

“Oh, god, dad.” That just pissed him off. “I don’t care if you think she was crazy for believing in reapers. She wasn’t, but that’s fine. I don’t give a damn.”

“Kaidan-“ Tom began again, with only slightly exasperated patience, until the words caught up to him. “Wait, you can’t tell me you…”

Alenko thought about calling for another beer. “I spoke to Sovereign. And a fifty thousand year old VI. And Saren, for that matter. The reapers are real. They wiped out the Protheans. Believe me, don’t believe me, facts are still facts.”

His father stared. “What the hell did you get up to on that ship?”

“We went through hell on that ship.” It was the best and worst time of his life, a contradiction, impossible to explain. “We were all alone out there. We had to figure out things that half the Alliance and the entire Council couldn’t figure out, and we only had each other. Every defeat, every victory, every loss.”

“It’s a hard thing to lose a ship-“

Kaidan was absolutely done. “You can’t give me platitudes like anything about this is normal.”
His father, too, ran short of patience. “Thanksgiving is normal. Eating with your family is normal.”

“Nothing is normal,” he exploded, loud enough to startle the bum in the corner. “For months I daydreamed about bringing Nathaly home to meet you, and I can’t sit there, listening to mom complain you won’t let her put basil in the mashed potatoes, when everything around me is just one big fat reminder that I’ll never see her again.”

Tom’s face sagged as the patient expression left it, replaced by something worse. Something lost. The silence dragged for several moments before he spoke. “Why didn’t you tell us any of this?”

He shook his head. Buried his face in his hands.

“Kaidan, this is what your family is for.” Almost hurt.

Alenko didn’t understand what was happening to him. A lot had transpired during the Normandy’s mission, a fair amount of it awful. It never affected his ability to work. Even after they crashed on Alchera, he held together and did what was needed to keep the crew safe.

He hunched over, shrinking in on himself. “After Nathaly- after the funeral everything stopped and I can’t seem to get started again. I can’t do my job like this. I’ve been trying so hard for so long and it never works.”

Tom touched his shoulder, tentatively. “That’s why you’re on leave? Because you’re having difficulty at work?”

Alenko flinched away. Wiped at his face. “They want me to talk to someone. There's no way that ends well.”

“Maybe not.” Tom shrugged, not uncaring, just acknowledging the truth of the situation. “You’re worried about being discharged?”

All things considered, that wasn’t the worst outcome on the table. Being disciplined for attacking a prisoner, fraternizing with a fellow officer in a time of war, or both was the worst outcome. But it seemed dramatic to mention it. “Sure.”

“Putting aside all the things I could say about that…” His father sighed. “If you insist on focusing on extremes, maybe consider whether you’d rather be discharged like this, or after you’ve gotten some help for how you’re feeling.”

A touch of anger flashed over his face. “Didn’t you hear me? I left her there to die. Nothing can fix that. Nothing can help that.”

Nothing should help that, he thought, but did not say.

“Listen to yourself.” Tom shifted on the stool, leaned forward, made Kaidan look at him. “I know you. You’re a survivor, Kaidan. You’ve been through awful things before and come out the other end. You don’t quit.”

Kaidan made a sound of irritation. Surprising himself to feel annoyed at his father’s absolutely clueless attempt to buck him up. But it was a real feeling, and not the aching void that had taken hold the last few months. It felt strange.

Before he could marvel at that for very long, Tom, perhaps bolstered by the lack of immediate objection, soldiered on. “Even if you were discharged, it’s not like you have no other skills. You
Alenko had graduated at the head of his class with a degree in electronic engineering at twenty-two, only to discover he hated sitting at a desk, making no real difference in the world. His father’s suggestion sounded a bit like hell and a lot like admitting defeat. He made a noncommittal noise.

“We can talk about this more later.” Tom collected himself, and when he spoke again his voice had leveled off, as if this was a typical conversation. “Let’s go home now. If you don’t want to eat that’s fine, but you’ll apologize to your mother. You don’t have to pretend to be happy but you do need to be kind.”

He looked around the dismal little bar, the glasses arrayed before him, the scrapes he’d dug into the varnish. There was shame, but shame was a constant companion these days, and he’d gotten used to living with it. It seemed like he was looking around with new eyes. Seeing this moment like he was actually inside it, rather than something happening at a distance, something that couldn’t touch him. It came to him then how awful it really was- fleeing his family in a middle of a holiday to drink alone- but just for a moment, he wasn’t numb. And anything not numb passed for good right now.

“Sure,” he said, surprised to mean it. “Let’s go home.”

Alenko slept in again the next day, but only until ten or so, a marked improvement. It helped that his sleep was mostly dreamless. No nosing through the Normandy wreckage in their makeshift shuttle, searching for Nathaly. No running through the flames of a burning ship until it went to pieces around him. He felt almost rested.

With that, like a small row of dominos, his appetite returned. Not in full force, but enough to send him poking through the leftovers around lunchtime. His jeans had started to acquire that slightly greasy feel of clothing worn too many times. Unfamiliar, to be irritated by it. He should have packed better.

His mother stepped into the kitchen as he was scavenging turkey from a gallon plastic bag. He stood up hurriedly, stuffing the piece into his mouth and trying to act like he hadn’t been eating directly from the fridge.

She hardly seemed to notice. Nimura was dressed for going out, in a light jacket with handbag in tow.

“I’m going to the movies,” she announced. She seemed a bit stiffer than usual, like she was using formality to conceal whatever she was feeling. Alenko had no doubt his father told her everything. “Would you like to come?”

It sounded less like a request, and more a command. His eyebrows crept into his hair. Nimura lifted her chin, and held her ground, her mouth thin. Waiting. He blinked. “Ok.”

They went out to the car. Alenko offered to drive, by she insisted she could manage. For the first ten minutes, they drove in silence, skimming the treetops. Alenko felt eighteen years old again, the summer between getting home from brain camp and leaving for college. His parents were broadly aware of what happened with Vyrnnus, because it was part of Conatix’s carefully legal settlement conversation with them, but short on most of the details, which Alenko had declined to volunteer.

Like now, his father had pressed him, with somewhat less success, until his mother made him
stop. She’d never asked him anything at all. They had gone to the cinema an awful lot, though.

Growing up aboard a space station as part of an extended experiment had left him without certain skills, like the training to drive a car. He wouldn’t actually get a license for another two years after that. Whenever it seemed like he was about to lose his mind if he had to stare at the walls of that house another second, his mom would somehow appear and suggest they go to a movie. He saw every single film released in the summer of 2169. In theory, anyway. Mostly he’d just sit in the cold dark of the theater and think, without anyone able to read his face, more private than his home.

“My father loved films,” his mother said, derailing his train of thought. “He gave all of his children chue len from his favorite parts.”

Alenko was aware, of course, that Nimura was not his mother’s first name as legally recognized by western governments, but she used her formal name so rarely he often forgot. In Thailand, people went by nicknames.

Even more disconcerting was any mention of her family. Barring the one banal anecdote about her cooking skills, she never spoke of them. He’d asked once, as a child, and her mouth thinned and she ignored the question entirely. Later his father told him she’d had a bad childhood and he shouldn’t ask again. Years after that, his history classes taught the Three Years War, the invasion of Indochina by the Chinese in the ‘30s, and he connected the dots and was glad he listened.

But now, she seemed to invite the conversation. Alenko proceeded with caution. “What were his favorites?”

“Musicals.” She half-smiled, a little fond, a little sad. “He used to sing whatever theme had his fancy as he did chores around the house. I can still hear him sometimes, in the back of my mind, while I work.”

He knew what she meant. Nathaly was always with him, one way or another, a kind of pain he’d miss more than it hurt. “Have you ever thought of going back? Just to remember?”

A shadow crossed her face. She shook her head. “There’s nothing left to visit.”

“I’m sorry.” He was chagrined. He thought about going back to Alchera all the time- just to find her body, just to have some sense of closure about it all. But of course it wasn’t the same thing.

She waved her hand, a don’t-worry-about-it. “It’s nice to remember the good things. Most of my memories of him are good, despite all that. My brothers and cousins too.”

Alenko noticed she didn’t mention her mother. He could just barely remember visiting her once in her Singapore apartment. She said something to his mother he couldn’t understand but made her cry- his mother, who never cried over anything. The next thing he knew they were checking into a hotel, while his father spoke in that tone that meant he was trying hard not to raise his voice. Alenko couldn’t have been more than four or five. They hadn’t gone back.

He was going to leave it at that, but Nimura seemed in a mood to talk. “My father wasn’t much older than you are now, when he died. But he survived the war. My mother is still alive, but she did not.”

Alenko’s expression hardened. So that was why she was bringing this up. He crossed his arms, slouching in his seat.

She turned down a new street, unconcerned with his reaction. “I won’t tell you the things the
soldiers did.”

“The Chinese?”

“You would think that’s important.” She gave a bitter chuckle.

He started to say the Alliance was different, a knee-jerk defense, and then realized she surely knew that. She’d married an Alliance officer. She had an Alliance marine for a son. Maybe that’s what she meant, calling him naïve, and he knew too well that the Alliance had its share of shameful moments. “Good and bad people everywhere.”

“Yes.” She shrugged, less careless than it seemed. “Some soldiers killed my brothers when they wouldn’t go with the army, boys younger than I was, and burned down our house. Another found us hiding in the trunk of a car when we crossed the border to Malaysia, didn’t tell his captain, and saved our lives.”

She looked impossibly small behind the car’s steering console. He was stricken, at a total loss for words. “I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t ever want you to know.”

“Then why—“

“Because I want you to believe me when I say talking about it to people who can’t begin to understand is completely unhelpful.” She reached across the car, folded her hand over his, glanced at him as much as driving would allow. “They just want to treat the pain, because they think pain is wrong. Nobody wants to sit in the pain with you.”

And that was just it. He didn’t want it not to hurt. Right now, it was the only way he could care about Nathaly at all- or anything that happened down on Alchera.

His mother’s hand fell away. “But I still wish you would have come home. It’s no good to be alone. You and your father, you roll your eyes when my casserole dish comes out, but all you can do for people is make sure they eat, and that they know their connection to other humans isn’t gone.”

“I had to go somewhere else.” He looked out the window, the buildings passing by. “California.”

“What could possibly be in California that was more important than your family?”

She couldn’t keep the hurt from her voice, and it startled him out of the memory. “It wasn’t that. There was this kid. His sister died on Alchera. I promised her I’d make sure he got everything he was due from the navy, and it’s hard enough to sort out without being sixteen and suddenly on your own.”

He still didn’t quite know how he managed to drag himself off the Citadel and spend that week navigating navy bureaucracy. Maybe it was simply knowing if he failed Chase again, he’d never be able to live with it. “She was a marine. One of mine. And I couldn’t find a way to get us out of there before she succumbed to her injuries.”

His mother glanced at him again. Even that slight weight of her gaze felt unbearable. “Six more of my marines died when their escape shuttle malfunctioned. Six, for no damn reason. And then this engineer, Talitha Draven? She gave up her life so we could have an antenna. A fu- freaking antenna.”
“This is the problem with the west,” she said, sighing as she turned the car into the lot. “You all think life is meant to be fair.”

“It’s not about fair,” He swallowed. “It’s about these people needed me to figure it out, and I couldn’t, and I can’t help but think if Nathaly was there…”

Alenko couldn’t finish the sentence. Because she always had a plan B, C, Z- whatever it took. She made a career of getting out of impossible situations. They needed her there- he needed her- and she stayed on that ship and burned.

But Nimura wasn’t having it. She set down the car, powered it down, and turned to face him fully. “Or maybe everything would have fallen out the same, but you’d remember differently, because you wouldn’t feel responsible.”

He blinked. “That’s… you’re just missing the point entirely.”

She wore that same small, smug smile that he remembered from when he got caught at something as a child, absolutely without humor but very satisfied. “Life isn’t fair, but it’s always changing. Things will look different one day. We can make it so. And sometimes, that has to be enough.”
Project Osiris

*June 2177, Six Years Prior*

Lieutenant Shepard sat back in the armchair and lit a cigarette. Outside the office window, the wind was picking up. Great billows of rusting dust clouded the air. Life under the Hellas Dome rarely included dust storms, but they had their own weather, all the same- their own strange convection currents, their own flat still days, even their own scattered rain once a Martian year or so. Humans released a lot of water.

“You know the rules,” said Dr. Chan, mock-chiding.

Shepard passed her the pack of cigarettes, along with her lighter. The doctor tapped one out. Smoking on base was strictly prohibited, but having discovered they shared a mutual disdain for that particular regulation and that they could easily blame each other if discovered, indulgence had become a regular feature of their weekly sessions.

That didn’t mean Shepard had forgotten Chan was an obstacle, if not an enemy outright. A challenge she was forced to navigate to get on with her life.

Chan lit up and exhaled. “You bring out the worst in me.”

Shepard raised the cigarette in salute. “Glad to be of service.”

“It’s been six weeks now.” Chan took another drag. “How are you feeling? How’s the knee?”

Shepard managed to twist her leg badly climbing- or more accurately, falling- down from the tree where she’d hid through the wet night. “Fine. I only sprained it.”

“Not keeping you up any more?”

The knee wasn’t, anyway. “Not at all.”

“Congratulations, by the way. On the promotion.” Chan likewise sat back, though she kept her attention on Shepard rather than the brewing storm.

Shepard watched the wind shift, sand scouring the glass in a brief gust. “Thank you.”

“From enlisted to Staff Lieutenant in five years. That’s quite the feat.” When Shepard made no response, Chan filled the silence. “I understand you’re getting married in November as well. That’s some impressive work-life balance, with such a meteoritic career.”

Todd spent last night in a hotel. He’d never done that before. Shepard’s gut twisted, but she put on a bright smile, bordering on sarcastic. “I try to eat right.”

“Of course, you’ve been through an awful lot as well. Some might say you’ve had more bad luck than good.”

Shepard took a drag, and tapped off the cigarette into Chan’s #1 Mom coffee mug, which in her experience had never held anything but ash. “I don’t see it that way.”

The mug matched the rest of the office in its tired, predictable kitchiness. They sat in a pair of beige chairs plump enough to look inviting, hard and tough enough to be easily cleaned. The art was catalogue with the wine-is-spectacular vibe common to middle-aged women like Chan. She
even had a mock-window mirror on the wall with muntins crossed in a diamond pattern like this was fucking Tuscany instead of a medical outbuilding on Hellas Naval Base. Shepard had thought, more than once, if her patients weren’t depressed when they arrived, they sure as hell would be by the time they left.

Chan consulted the thick folder of records on her lap. “You weren’t even out of training when you experienced your first batarian attack.”

That was her second round of zero gee training, at a station in the Verge. “The patrol came out of FTL practically on top of my squad. They attempted to gain access to the station via EVA to the maintenance hatches.”

“You killed one of the assailants.”

“Yes.” Shepard smashed his face plate against a girder. Blood was still bubbling from the gash on his forehead when she confirmed him dead and left him there. “We kept them from breaching the civilian quarters, and I got recommended to N1 for it. Not such a bad outcome.”

“Then there was Aonia. Batarian rogues held you captive for six days.”

“Disgruntled officers, pissed that a corporal turned their tactics against them. It was a tantrum.” But her right hand still strayed to the fingers of her left, running her thumb over the place where they’d been broken. Not even a sign of a scar, now.

“A tantrum that put you in a dreadnought sick bay for a week.”

“Today, Aonia’s a thriving human colony. That feint wasn’t everything, but it was the beginning of the end. I’d call that a victory.”

“And recent events on Akuze…?” Chan let the question dangle.

Shepard took a drag. Blew out smoke. Sat for a moment as it spiraled between them, feeling the shallow cuts across her arms smart beneath the foundation concealing them. Remembering Todd’s face when he came home and saw the mess she’d made of their kitchen with the crockery scattered over the floor.

Put a disarming smile on her face. “Maybe that one was just plain bad luck.”

“You’ve chafed at this process,” Chan said, understandingly, a little too much so for Shepard’s comfort. “But you know that trauma doesn’t always express itself immediately. It’s not unusual to experience an outburst weeks or months after the fact, even if you were unaffected at the time.”

“I’m not unaffected.” That was crucial. Pure stoicism would be read as very heavy trauma. She had to be upset- but just the right amount, no more, no less. And it had to be expressed in the right ways.

Breaking every dish in her house because damn it, she needed to be back at work, needed something to keep her head clear and her hands busy and the navy had stuck her with desk duty for six weeks, was not the right way. So she covered up the places their sharp edges cut her skin, let her fiancé storm out, and pretended everything was fine for another day. A day which, thank god, was almost over. She just had to get through this appointment.

“Oh, I know.” Chan waved the declaration away, beyond frustrated. A PhD in psychology did nothing to prepare her for something like Shepard. “We preach compartmentalization and I’ll commend you on taking the lessons to heart. But to be frank, any other patient would be an
“Have you had many patients from special operations?” Shepard inquired. She was leaning on the N-school mystique perhaps a bit too heavily, but then, Chan was being a bit too candid. Like she wasn’t really a patient. That was a trap if ever she saw one.

Chan acknowledged that with a shrug. “No. I suppose you’ve been better prepared than most—by temperament and training. Still.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” Shepard let a little of her frustration show. “I don’t understand how my perception of my own experiences can be right or wrong. I can’t force myself to be other people.”

Chan was taken aback. For the most part, Shepard had maintained a veneer of congeniality throughout their sessions, if an impatient one. “It’s not a test. I just doubt—“

“Well, don’t.” Shepard stubbed out her cigarette in the mug, slouched back, and crossed her arms. “Look, I want to get back to my job. I’m going stir-crazy. So let’s cut the twenty-questions bullshit. Tell me what magic words I need to say, what hoop you’re waiting for me to jump, and I’ll do it.”

Chan stared at her for an uncomfortably long moment. Shepard held her gaze, to all appearances an open book, her desire to resume her duties sincere enough to hide the genuine crazy.

The doctor looked away first. “I met with the DMHS board yesterday. They’ve approved your return to active duty status.”

Shepard blinked. That was the last thing she expected to hear. Her mouth started to form the word “finally”, but she caught it in time. “Well, shit. That’s great to hear.”

“I know you think you’re doing well. But if you ever change your mind about that…” Chan appeared frustrated herself, that this puzzle was slipping from her grasp before she solved it. “We’re always happy to lend an ear.”

“Thanks.” She rose.

Chan likewise got to her feet, and held out her hand. “Good luck, Lieutenant. Tell your fiancé he’s fortunate to have such a level-headed bride.”

When she arrived home after Akuze, they had an explosive argument that started with his failure to visit her in the hospital aboard Arcturus Station, and ended with his accusation that Shepard only cared about her mission, and never considered him in her decisions. As if what happened was somehow her fault— that if she loved him more, she would have foreseen the thresher maw attack and stayed home. Or maybe implying that even if she had such precognition, she still would have gone.

Neither of them had yet apologized.

She shook Chan’s hand and forced a chuckle that sounded almost completely natural. She was getting good at that. “Oh, I think he knows.”

Shepard made her way to her Fire Starter. It was a hot day, for Mars under the Hellas tent and orbital mirror, the skycar’s canopy not-quite burning to the touch. It made her want a cold beer. And hell, she deserved a celebration for passing this gauntlet.
She could message Todd from the bar and break the news. Maybe stay at her dad’s place for a few
days until they both cooled off, and start over again. Maybe finally find the words to make him
understand why she needed this- that it wasn’t pointless danger. That if she didn’t give the
adrenaline a way out it just pooled up inside and made her do something truly insane. It had
always been like that, even before she enlisted. Since she was a kid.

Shepard climbed into the driver’s seat and patted her pocket, searching for her pack of cigarettes.
Then she frowned and checked her other pocket. Then remembered it sitting with her lighter on
the little end table between their chairs in Chan’s office, sighed, and walked back inside.

As she approached the office, however, she heard Chan speaking, her voice raised loud enough to
penetrate the hatch. “I played your hand. She didn’t bite. I have no excuse to keep her here.”

A man answered, quieter, though not especially less irritated. “You could have pushed harder,
provoked her. Just like you could have tried harder to sway the board.”

Chan answered stiffly. “I have an ethical obligation to present the truth. And the truth is, Shepard
appears to have absorbed the incident on Akuze without lasting psychological harm. The board
was correct to return her to active duty.”

A fury rose in Shepard. She raised her hand, to slide the hatch aside and storm in, but then thought
of something else. Instead, she moved to the next room and found it unlocked.

The technician jumped out of his seat and turned so fast he almost tripped over his own chair.
“You can’t be in here!”

Shepard’s eyes scanned the room. Electronic recording equipment filled a small bench- including
a monitor frozen on an image of her shaking Chan’s hand. And over the bench was a large gray
window, crisscrossed by a diamond pattern, with a view into Chan’s office. The transparent back
of a two-way mirror.

Her nuclear glare turned to the technician and pinned him to the air. “Were you recording my
sessions?”

“Orders-“ he started.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about-“ Then she stopped short, because the man in Chan’s office had
turned towards the mirror, giving her a clear view of his face. Her blood ran cold- and then
erupted in fire.

Both Chan and her guest turned as the hatch slid open. Shepard moved into the room like a tidal
wave. Farrell had just started to step back when her fist swung up and connected with his face.
She felt something crunch.

Chan’s hands flew to her mouth. Farrell drooled blood into his palm, and spat out a tooth. He
stared at it with more shock than pain.

Shepard advanced on him. “You!”

Chan found her voice. “Lieutenant Shepard!”

“He filmed our sessions!” She rounded on Chan. “And you knew about it?”

Chan held her hands in front of her chest, a feeble defense. “He had authorization. I never liked
it-“
“You could have told me.”

Farrell laughed. It was so unexpected that it silenced the room and sent a shiver down her spine. He wiped his mouth. “The act of observation spoils the experiment.”

Her hand balled into a fist once more. Her voice went low and cold. “I am not an experiment.”

“You’re a valuable collection of data.” Farrell didn’t have an ounce of shame. “Unique and highly coveted data. Data that could revolutionize combat- with a proper understanding of its… limitations.”

“He wanted to record reactions at the emotional extremes,” Chan cut in. “Something about boundary conditions. He ordered me to push you.”

Farrell let out a snarl of betrayal. Shepard stepped between them. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You have no conception of how special you are.” He dabbed at his mouth with his jacket sleeve. “All of you are, of course, all my very special subjects, but you’ve always had a particularly intriguing neurology.”

She shoved up against him. “Stay the hell out of my life.”

“With all due respect, no.” He edged away, and attempted a pacifying smile, his teeth still spattered red. “The work I’m doing is critical to the future of the human race. To our security and survival. You of all people should understand-“

Two marines burst into the office, side arms drawn. Shepard saw the nervous face of the tech bobbing behind them in the hall. Security.

She immediately stepped away put her hands up to show she had no weapons. The guys on base security tended to combine a lack of intelligence and a high level of anxiety with respect to their personal safety. One of them aimed at her anyway, while the other addressed Farrell. “Are you alright, sir?”

He wiped at his mouth one last time. “She didn’t do much damage… thanks to your timely arrival.”

Chan’s mouth thinned. “He started it.”

The marines exchanged a glance- one that said this was above their paygrade. Shepard groaned.

Sure enough, the second marine gestured towards the door. “We’ll need you to both come down to the guard post and sort this out. This way.”

As she was marched from the room, Shepard realized she still didn’t have her cigarettes, and this was certain to take a while. Shit.

October 2183

Aboard the Citadel, in a heavily secured conference room, Councilor David Anderson stirred his coffee. The screen displayed an old vid recording of Shepard giving an oral account of the assault on Dr. Farrell to the Hellas Base security supervisor. Anderson found himself staring at her more than hearing her report. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-three, maybe twenty-four.
Impossibly young.

Same insouciance, though. She’d had that since she was born as far as Anderson could tell. It brought a smile to his face.

Captain Rahimi stopped mid-sentence and furrowed her brow. “Sir?”

Anderson glanced away from the projection. Rahimi stood beside it with an aura of impatience. “I don’t quite feel I have your attention.”

He took a sip of coffee. Cleared his throat. “My mind wandered for a moment. Please, continue.”

Across the table, Admiral Hackett frowned. They’d worked together long enough for him to guess what had Anderson distracted.

“As I was saying,” Rahimi went on with just the slightest edge to her voice, “While investigating the incident involving Commander Shepard’s mandatory counseling sessions, the navy discovered the Ministry of Intelligence was exploiting a joint program in order to exercise improper oversight of naval personnel, particularly the group of special operations officers central to the study.”

“Project Osiris,” Hackett said.

“Precisely.” Rahimi froze the playback and turned towards the two men. “The navy withdrew its support for the program and, officially, Osiris was terminated.”

Anderson frowned. “Officially?”

Hackett folded his hands and leaned forward. “Captain, I don’t believe I requested any speculation in this report.”

“Sixty-seven percent of SAMI Special Project Division’s budget is black, sir,” she answered, not backing down. “And we know Farrell continued as a SPD employee, with no accessible record of his activities, until he vanished several years ago—presumably recruited by Cerberus.”

“If he wasn’t recruited earlier.” Hackett sighed.

Anderson glanced at Hackett. “And we know he’s still obsessed with Shepard, if not his other subjects.”

Hackett nodded, not without reluctance. “It may be that Cerberus proved more interested in his research than SAMI or the navy. To be fair, the work itself was incredibly advanced stuff. Farrell was onto something.”

Anderson looked again at Shepard’s face, a picture of disgust at how Farrell’s actions had violated what should have been a private space. She’d been ordered into therapy following Akuze, over her strong objections. It was standard procedure. “She never trusted DMHS again, you know. I sometimes think if she had, maybe…”

Hackett grimaced. Rahimi was merely confused. “Maybe what, sir?”

*Maybe she wouldn’t have stayed aboard a burning ship until it exploded around her. Maybe she would have valued her own life more than that.* He looked down into his coffee. Took another sip.
Hackett changed the subject. “What I don’t understand is why we’re focusing on this. Project Osiris is six years in the past. That’s an eternity even in the white world.”

She slid her hands behind her back and lifted her chin. “Farrell curated an extensive collection of sensitive data on some of our best marines, data he certainly shared with SAMI and likely with Cerberus as well, for a project SAMI may or may not have continued after the navy withdrew. We’ve found highly encrypted files on his omni-tool.”

“What’s your concern, Captain? Speak plainly.”

“SAMI’s clamoring for us to release him into their custody. And they’ve got more sway with the committee members in Parliament. What will they do with these files? For that matter, what will they do with Farrell himself?”

“You have some thoughts on the matter?” Hackett asked, dryly.

“I don’t know what they’ll do.” Rahimi held her ground. “Nobody in the navy does. And it’s our people at risk, sir. That’s my point.”

Anderson still didn’t see her point. “What’s your concern, Captain? Speak plainly.”

“SAMI’s more a fiefdom than an agency. They’ve never been good at respecting our common enemies, not if they see something they can co-opt. They may try to make a double agent out of him.”

Hackett sat back, troubled. He stroked his chin and spoke slowly. “If nothing else, by raiding the lab on Nepheron, Shepard proved Cerberus absolutely cannot be trusted. It’s playing with fire.”

“I don’t know what they’ll do.” Rahimi held her ground. “Nobody in the navy does. And it’s our people at risk, sir. That’s my point.”

Anderson didn’t either, but he could imagine some possibilities. “SAMI’s more a fiefdom than an agency. They’ve never been good at respecting our common enemies, not if they see something they can co-opt. They may try to make a double agent out of him.”

Hackett sat back, troubled. He stroked his chin and spoke slowly. “If nothing else, by raiding the lab on Nepheron, Shepard proved Cerberus absolutely cannot be trusted. It’s playing with fire.”

Speaking of that, there’s another issue, sir.” Rahimi coughed. “Between publicly revealing Cerberus’ role in the attack on Akuze, and the loss of the Normandy to the ‘geth’, opinion of the navy in the human space is on the decline.”

The quotes clanged around geth with heavy irony. Though nearly everyone else believed that story, nobody inside this room was under the illusion that the geth could suddenly outsmart the Normandy’s advanced stealth technology.

Anderson massaged his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. “Not to mention outcry over so much loss of life and assets defending the Citadel from Saren’s fleet after the Council refused to lift a finger to help our colonies in the war.”

Though their alien allies continued to express their gratitude, in Alliance space, the battle had become much more controversial. Anderson sometimes felt like he was fighting Council politics with one hand and human politics with the other. Former ambassador Udina, who had stayed on as his attaché, found it deeply amusing.

“So we can’t afford to leak another major failure,” Hackett said. “Such as might happen if Farrell’s put on a leash.”

Rahimi nodded. “Particularly not concerning Shepard.”

“The media frenzy surrounding Shepard’s death died soon after the funeral.” Anderson was
confused.

Rahimi and Hackett exchanged a glance. Hackett addressed her. “Thank you for your presentation, Captain. We’ll do our best to block or delay Farrell’s transfer. Good work. Dismissed.”

“You thank you, sir.” She gave Anderson a nod, and departed the room.

Once the door had shut behind her, Hackett sagged into his chair, and rubbed his face.

Dread rose in Anderson. “What?”

“We might be looking at a small resurgence in Shepard’s profile.” He set his shoulders and leaned forward on the desk. Folded his hands. Steeling himself. “We’re closing out the Normandy investigation. The report should be released in the next several weeks.”

Anderson felt like the wind had gone out of him. He slumped in the chair.

“All of the personnel not rescued at Alchera will be officially moved from MIA to KIA status. Shepard included.” It was a formality only- they’d already held the funerals- but one that re-opened old wounds. “I’m expecting at least one media outlet to pick it up. If it hits a slow news cycle…” Hackett shrugged. The media were beyond any of their control. “You might get questions on it.”

Anderson felt a hundred years old. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

His old friend hesitated. “I know what she meant to you, but David, it’s been three months. You can’t even talk about her?”

The look he shot was a warning- a pointed one.

Hackett sat back and gestured at the still-active screen, at the video of Shepard. “Can’t watch an old, crappy vid without sinking into grief?”

“How long would it take you to get over losing Margaret or Susan?” he asked sharply, naming Hackett’s daughters.

Hackett shook his head.

Anderson wouldn’t let it go. “More than three months? Or less?”

“Maybe you should pay a visit to DMHS yourself,” Hackett said, getting up. “Couldn’t hurt.”

Anderson didn’t dignify that with a reply, as Hackett left the room. He gave the screen one last glance. It didn’t seem possible she could be perfectly alive in there, and dead out here. Not possible and definitely not fair.
May 2184

Miranda Lawson entered the clone lab through the decontamination lock, and was immediately confronted with the uncomfortable sight of Dr. Wilson attempting to inhale her agent, Rasa, with his mouth.

“Christ,” Miranda said, crossing her arms. “I’ve been looking for you for the past twenty minutes.”

Wilson released the young woman with panicked haste. Rasa slunk away sullenly, several steps, just enough to satisfy Miranda’s glare. The girl had been a skilled if impulsive operative for as long as Miranda had the misfortune of her acquaintance. The Illusive Man had occasional use for her, but the rest of the time, she was Miranda’s burden. More so lately.

Miranda gave her a pointed look. “Where is my latest dossier?”

At some point, regardless of whether the project was successful, they would need a support team for the next phase. Assembling it was Rasa’s job. She chafed at the desk work. “It’s coming along.”

“It should come along faster.”

Rasa sneered, and turned back to the clone tank. She caressed the smooth glass cylinder, her dark eyes as shadowed as the currents swirling within. For now the agent’s hair was its natural black. Over the last several months, Miranda had witnessed every shade in the human spectrum and a few off it entirely. Rasa was a consummate infiltrator- an irritating chameleon. “I don’t know why you even need Shepard. You’ve got her DNA. Grow out a couple dozen.”

Miranda gave the tank a glance. The naked body suspended within was Shepard, for a given value, anyway. It had the same long limbs though the musculature was less developed. Unlike their actual subject, whom the neurologists shaved bald, the clone had a tangle of red hair, submerged in the growth fluid and floating in tendrils about its head. Freckles dusted every inch of its brown skin. Some of the clone lab scientists had disparagingly dubbed it the “spotted shitbird”, although, wisely, not in earshot of Miranda.

But by whatever name, the body was a facsimile only. “No clone would have a fraction of Shepard’s ability or experience, even with extensive training. It’s not the same thing at all.”

“You can’t be sure her memory will be intact.” Rasa was scornful, but her fingers still flitted across the glass, betraying curiosity.

She steeled herself for civility, put Rasa out of her mind, and held out her data pad to Wilson. “I didn’t come down here for a philosophical argument. We need to discuss the project’s rate of progress.”

Wilson snorted. "Miracles take time, Lawson. For crap’s sake-"

"I’m not accusing you," she said, cutting him off. "I came to talk about solutions."

"What's your problem with our progress?"
"At this rate, we'll never be done." She scrolled down to the relevant charts. "Ten months and she's still not off bypass. The first heart didn't take. Her lungs are a disaster- really, all the major organ systems are in shambles. Growing new tissue is taking too long especially with the failures we've encountered."

Wilson was beyond tired of the argument. "Her body's a wreck. Worse than that. Even with exact DNA matches, it's hard to convince anything to grow into place. A human body is a finely tuned machine. You can't just expect new parts to work without any infrastructure to support them."

Miranda was exasperated. "The reapers will have come and gone before she wakes up."

He took the data pad and eyed her findings. "And what exactly do you want me to do about it? You're the one who insisted we focus on her brain. That’s taken resources from other needs."

"It's time to consider alternative options." She ticked them off on her fingers. "Bioartificial organs, polymer grafts- things that take weeks, not months."

"The Illusive Man wants her just as she was. That means organic materials wherever possible." They’d been forced to employ some cybernetics already, because nerves were so very difficult to clone.

"He's willing to reconsider on this front. I just got his signature today. Scroll down."

Wilson rubbed his neck. "I'll be damned."

“And then there’s this.” She reached over and accessed another report. “Have you seen these numbers?”

“I see twelve thousand numbers every day.” But he scanned the data briefly. “Her neurological activity is ticking up. I thought you’d be happy.”

“She’s in a medically induced comatose state. We shouldn’t be seeing this.”

Wilson shrugged. “The brain’s more art than science. Our thresholds were established by averages- and that data is based on typical brains, not ones that spent months dead and got hashed back together with cybernetic nerves.”

She summoned as much patience as possible to avoid a pointless argument. “I understand that the predictions are only estimates, but Shepard’s spiking well past the coma threshold.”

Rasa smirked, leaning against the tank and folding her arms. “Maybe her new nervous system is doing her thinking for her.”

Miranda kept her attention on Wilson. “Three times in the last day.”

“For seconds at a time.” Wilson was irritated. “Miranda, if she was waking up, don’t you think I’d know? Rasa’s no scientist but her instincts aren’t bad. It’s probably residual feedback from the cybernetics.”

Miranda rubbed her eyes. She felt like she hadn’t slept in days. This project was exhausting- the work never ended, without the added hassles of the team’s recalcitrant personalities. She turned and faced Rasa squarely. “This isn’t the first time I’ve caught you down here. Just the least the appetizing.”

Wilson scowled and crossed his arms. Rasa seemed to find that funny. She flipped her dark hair
over her shoulder, and jerked her thumb at the doctor. “He likes to show off.”

Wilson’s glare could have driven rivets through steel. Miranda held up her hand. “I don’t have time to concern myself with your ill-conceived entertainments. Go finish your report—”

An alarm sounded throughout the station. The artificially smooth voice of the VI spoke over the blare. “Warning. Patient neurological activity has exceeded critical levels for greater than ten seconds.”

As one body, Miranda and Wilson shut up and turned towards the nearest terminal.

Rasa’s voice became a singsong. “Someone’s waking up early.”

The VI’s bland intonation was at odds with the growing emergency. “Warning. Motion detectors in the patient laboratory have been tripped.”

They rushed towards the elevator, leaving Rasa gaping behind them.

Shepard was two decks up and halfway across the station. Miranda punched the elevator panel three times before the doors finally closed.

“Warning,” the VI said as they started to move. “Patient neurological activity has now exceeded critical levels for greater than sixty seconds.”

The doors opened. They rushed down the hallway, slammed into the anteroom and initiated the decontamination lock. “Warning. Attempting to enter the patient laboratory without proper sterile gear is against facility procedures and may result in termination.”

“Override!” Miranda tapped her code into the access panel.

“Please step into the airlock.” The VI shut the door behind them. “Decontamination commencing. Thirty seconds remain.”

Air began to blow, brushing any stray dust or hair off them. Miranda stepped to the other end of the lock, her nose inches from the glass. On the table, Shepard’s arm twitched. “Oh, god—she is waking up.”

Wilson paled. “More than seventy percent of her biological functions are still on machine assistance. The pain alone—”

“She’ll go into shock.” Miranda pressed her hand to the glass.

“Warning. Patient neurological activity has exceeded critical levels for one hundred eighty seconds.” The VI paused as it processed the next announcement. The alarm continued to blare. “Decontamination in process. Fifteen seconds remain.”

Shepard’s leg bent at the knee, her foot flexing. Miranda saw her career flash before her eyes.

Irradiation scanners activated in the walls and swept over the pair of them. “Decontamination in process. Five seconds remain.”

Miranda was pushing through the hatch before it was open more than a few centimeters, wedging in her arm and forcing it open as quickly as it would allow. Wilson was right behind her. She rushed to Shepard’s side, querying the instruments. “Damn it, she’s not ready!”

Wilson tapped at a terminal and swore. “The sedative wore off—”
“Her pulse is skyrocketing.” Miranda glanced down. On the table, Shepard’s eyes cracked open. Her arm rose in the air, groping blindly above her. Her mouth contorted as the pain began to hit her. Shepard’s breathing turned to gasps. “We’re losing her!”

“Working on it!” Wilson snatched a datapad and began scrawling an equation.

“Another dose!” Miranda spun the dial to re-engage the morphine drip recklessly, and grabbed her flailing hand, unnerved by watching it reach for nothing, and tried to lay it down. Every muscle in Shepard’s arm trembled violently. Every line of her face was taut, stretched over the bones like sun-brittled rubber.

“Just give me two goddamn seconds to calculate the amount—“

“Now!” Shepard began to convulse. Her hand clenched down on Miranda’s tight enough to grind the bones together.

Wilson shook his head and filled a syringe. He emptied it into her IV line.

Miranda held her breath. Gradually, Shepard’s heart slowed. Her grip went slack. Her head lolled to the side. “She’s stabilizing.”

Wilson scowled. “I’m going to kill the overnight techs.”

Miranda’s eyes cut to him with all the fury of a solar storm. “This isn’t their fault. I told you your estimates were off. Run the numbers again.”

He rolled his eyes and opened his mouth. Miranda took a step towards him. He swallowed and turned back to the terminal, sullen, pulling up the most recent records. She turned back to Shepard and lay her unresisting arm on her chest.

Then she took the sheet, which was left tangled at her waist by the last round of techs, and pulled it up to her shoulders, to cover her modesty.

Shepard’s face was calm now, once more under the soporific effects of her coma cocktail, blue eyes shut fast. But Miranda couldn’t get the other expression out of her mind— the one consumed by pain and panic. For the last eight months, Shepard had been “the subject”, a project, more of an experiment than a human being. A puzzled mess of tissue lying on a slab. This was the first time Miranda truly realized there was a person lurking under all of that.

She couldn’t unsee it, but rather wished she could. It was easier that way.

Wilson continued to query the lab’s dedicated VI, shaking his head. “Your gut feel might have been correct, but that’s all it was. These are powerful medications. The records we stole from Alliance medical don’t go to the level of detail I need to fine-tune the dosages, so all we have is trial and error. That’s true for everything we’re attempting.”

Miranda was still looking down at Shepard’s face. “And if you had more detailed records?”

“I suppose the Alliance might have something else hidden away for spec ops soldiers. But how—“

“Leave that to me.” Miranda headed for the door. “Your girlfriend needs to get out of the house more anyway.”

///////
Back aboard the Citadel, deep in the winding warrens of the Alliance Outpost nestled near the port edge of Zakera Ward, Lieutenant Marshall frowned at his terminal screen. “I’ve got something here.”

Alenko glanced up from his desk. It chafed at first, having a desk, but five months into his new assignment, he had to admit it was less dull than the downtime between missions aboard a ship. At least he had real work to do that didn’t involve assigning KP rotations. And absolutely anything beat twiddling his thumbs in his apartment and going to counseling appointments, and waiting.

Corporal French likewise raised her head. “What’ve you got?”

“Strange chatter in the Terminus. More mentions of that Lazarus thing.” Marshall swung his terminal towards the room. They called it the pit. Built into a short shaft with the floor right up against the outermost wall of the ward, it afforded a splendid view of the nebula- as long as you were willing to climb a flight of stairs any time you wanted to go anywhere. CT sat at the very bottom.

French and Green got up to take a closer look. Private North, he noted, did not. North hadn’t been in more than a year, and kept to herself. Alenko thought she’d have been better off with a traditional groundside posting. But she had a real knack for computer forensics that seemed wasted elsewhere, while lacking the college degree that would’ve paved her way into naval intelligence. Every bureaucracy ever made was over-invested in bits of paper, and unfortunately for her, the Alliance was no different.

Corporal French scanned the comm logs with evident disappointment. She had a little more enthusiasm than sense. “Looks standard to me.”

“It’s a Blue Suns transmission. We picked it up at one of our listening posts, near Sahrabarik.” That system hosted Omega, a hollowed asteroid of a space station, and one of the great metropolises of the Terminus. “Seems to be another shipment, nine million credits this time. Who the hell has this kind of money?”

Green pointed at the screen. “What’s the receiving vessel?”

“Unregistered. Looks human- transmission plaintext is English from their end.”

Plenty of disgruntled humans had made their way to the Terminus in recent years. Some formed colonies, in defiance of Council directives, while others had turned to piracy or worse. And this so-called “Lazarus” organization was creating an unprecedented diversion of cash and resources. Alenko’s interest grew slightly less casual. “Any telltales in their transmission protocols?”

“Negative.” Marshall shook his head. “But they’re damn sophisticated, I’ll say that. Feels like they were dumbing down their encryption for the Suns.”

North got up to better scrutinize the data. She frowned. “Let me take a look.”


Curiosity got the better of Alenko and he joined them at Marshall’s desk. He scanned the codes North had unearthed. Something almost like déjà vu came over him.

French caught his frustrated stare. “What’s up?”

“Don’t know.” He folded his arms, brow furrowed. He was sure he’d seen this somewhere before.
“Probably just noise,” Green said.

“It’s not noise.” Alenko shook his head. It was on the tip of his tongue.

North sat back, gathering her springy black hair into a knot, a thoughtless habit she couldn’t seem to break. Every morning she came in with it regulation-perfect, and within twenty minutes, it was down around her ears and she was playing with it. “Green’s right, sir.”

French snickered. “That’ll be a first.”

“Enough of that,” said a new voice. The squad straightened. Major Jackson came down the stairs, along with the other squad leaders, fresh from the morning briefing. She jerked her thumb behind her. “Alenko, Cook wants to see you.”

His brow furrowed. “Why?”

She shrugged and found her own desk. “Some request from Command.”

He gave that frustratingly familiar scrap of comm metadata a final glance, and took to the stairs himself.

Colonel Cook’s office was up two stories and down a narrow hall. The last time he’d seen Cook one-on-one was January, when he first arrived at his new post. He couldn’t honestly say he was impressed.

The Alliance counterterrorism group assigned to the Citadel lacked the prestige of its sister departments back aboard Arcturus Station and in the Skyllian Verge. Citadel CT focused mainly on threats from extra-Council space- difficult for the Alliance to address directly without irritating the Council. Up until a year or so back, when Jackson formed a strike team as a sort of vaguely HQ-blessed experiment, all they did was collect reports.

Alenko’s ego hadn’t suffered. By then he was glad to get any assignment at all. But it did explain how Cook wound up with this command, presumably because coasting him to retirement was more dignified than forcing him out.

The feeling was mutual. Cook knew he’d been on medical leave without any obvious injury, if not the specifics, and made his opinion of that plain. Alenko rapped on the hatch.

“Enter,” called a voice.

He tagged the door’s holographic interface, and it split in two pieces and slid smoothly aside. Cook was a zealous believer in “clean office, clean mind”, to the extent that the room’s only furniture was a chair and a desk. A single framed holo rested on its gleaming surface. Cook sat behind it in a sharply creased uniform fit for parade, his dark bald pate as polished as the wood, studying a datapad.

Alenko came to a stop a meter or so from the desk and waited with his hands folded behind his back. The holo had been moved since he last stood in this office, allowing him to see the image for the first time- Cook standing proudly beside a young woman in a graduation gown, her long braids coiled up in a bun behind one ear. That might explain why Cook hadn’t yet retired of his own volition, if he was still supporting his daughter.

Cook set down the datapad at last and got to his feet. He was a tall, spare man who could’ve passed for fifteen years younger if not for the predatory judgment of his eyes, always seeking fault, and where the skin wrinkled about the bony fingers of his hands. He clasped them together as he
regarded Alenko. “I received orders from Fleet Admiral Hackett to send you up to the hotel to assist with a special project. Why?”

“Got me, sir. I don’t know anyone there.” Alenko was as confused as Cook. The hotel was slang for the outpost’s brig. It was a temporary holding facility only, until Alliance miscreants or more rarely foreign prisoners could be transferred to the big detention center at JMC headquarters in Vancouver.

“We’ve received orders from his office before,” Cook went on, dangerously casual. “These came from the Fleet Admiral personally. Asking for you by name.”

Alenko couldn’t begin to catch his meaning. “Sir?”

“You’re not worried?”

“Should I be?” This was becoming tedious. “Hackett was reasonable enough the last time I met him.”

There was a long, unreadable pause. “You’ve met him.”

Cook’s voice was just the slightest bit flat. Alenko cocked his head. “Once. While I was posted to the Normandy.”

His expression grew darker. Almost… jealous.

Alenko cleared his throat. “The admiral was meeting with Shepard. I just happened to be there.”

“I see.” Cook picked his datapad back up, as if Alenko couldn’t be less important. “Once you’re done helping the Fleet Admiral with his chores, I want to see that analysis of mercenary incursions into the Traverse. If it’s not beneath you.”

Alenko suppressed a groan. He’d only begun collating the data yesterday; the report wasn’t expected for another week. “Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.” Cook didn’t even look up as he settled back into his seat.

He bit his lip, turned on his heel, and left the office before the absurdity of the situation could fully mature into irritation. The way to the hotel was up and hubward, but he trekked back down first to fill in Jackson on events. “Command has some kind of errand for me. Not sure how long it’ll take.”

She leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on the desk. “Let me know when you’re done.”

“You could have warned me about his mood,” Alenko said, put out.

“And spoil your fun?” She crossed her arms, smug. “Anyway, you survived Shepard’s command. You can weather Cook.”

Alenko’s gut twisted. But his mother was right about that much. Things changed. “See you later.”

She waved him off. He climbed out of the pit and set out for the hotel.

The Alliance outpost was a small one, established in the old days when Udina was ambassador, ten years ago. Somewhat larger now that Anderson was a Councilor, and since the Alliance Fifth Fleet saved the Citadel from certain destruction at the hands of Saren Arterius. Still not as large as the outposts commanded by the asari and salarians- much less the entire decks aboard Kithoi Ward
that comprised a full turian base. Instead, the Alliance navy was shoehorned into unused spaces.

The geometry of the Alliance outpost was consequently… strange. It tucked around HVAC conduits and life support stations, traversing previously-unoccupied niches here and there, across five decks- a three-dimensional maze that defied all maps.

Alenko’s route required him to go all the way back to the security checkpoint at the main entrance, and take another winding hallway to the brig. He’d never visited this section of the outpost before, and had to stop to ask directions several times.

When he finally arrived, he found a young woman dressed smartly in civilian business casual waiting for him. She extended her hand. “Lieutenant Alenko, I presume?”

“That’s me.” He shook.

“Laurie Andrysiak, from the Ministry of Intelligence.” She gave him a bright smile, displaying a perfect row of teeth. The rest of her was similarly put-together, from her well-tended cap of ash blonde hair to her shined patent shoes.

His heart sank. He felt a headache coming on. “Not this again.”

Her expression turned sympathetic. “I understand you’re caught in the middle, but the navy’s been dragging its heels for months surrendering Farrell to us. Now they’ve got a direct order from the Minister of Defense.”

“Why am I here?” he asked bluntly, unable to disguise the hint of anger.

Andrysiak began walking. “The navy’s wasted a lot of effort trying to get anything out of Farrell, but they’re out of time. They insisted on one final shot. Unfortunately, the only person he’s spoken with on any subject of interest is you.”

“I’m no interrogator.” Alenko had to jog a few steps to catch up.

“Perhaps that’s why.” She found the notion amusing. “At any rate, I’m to let you have your chat, and then take Farrell away with me.”

She stopped before a hatch and nodded at the guard. “Just come out when you’re done. We’ll be waiting here if you run into any problems.”

The guard, a marine private, entered a code. The hatch slid aside. “Sir.”

Alenko nodded, swallowed once, and went inside. The hatch shut behind him.

Farrell sat at a small table, his hands bound and resting on its plastic surface. He lit up as Alenko entered the room. “Finally. I was beginning to doubt the navy had any scruples whatsoever.”

Alenko remained standing. “Why wait for me?”

“I expected the marines-“ he sneered the word- “To give up pursuit when the woods exploded, but you continued. Fire in the hab didn’t dissuade you. I put a gun to the head of your compatriot and you were not deterred. That tenacity is rare in the Alliance, but common in Cerberus.”

“No, Cerberus keeps going long past the point where it was right to give up. That’s not tenacity. That’s a disease.”

“I would have thought you had an appreciation for the relentless. You seemed a great admirer of
After Jackson’s unintended jab, Nathaly was simmering closer to the surface than usual these days. He still thought of her often. It didn’t hurt any less. He’d become accustomed to the ache, like some kind of permanent injury, but he didn’t appreciate people poking at it. “What did you do to her?”

His jeering expression grew slightly fixed. “I don’t quite follow—”

“I got debriefed after your stunt on Chasca, and I can read between the lines when I’m asked a particular series of questions.” Alenko leaned towards him and jabbed his finger at the desk. “You dragged me in here, you keep invoking her name, and you’re going to tell me why.”

Farrell sniffed. “She was only a small part of my great work. It started as a means to improve a… theoretical… combat AI. I needed hard data, authentic biometric and neural measurements from the best human specimens available. Simplistic, yes, but the intelligence ministry has always lacked vision.”

“Bullshit.” Alenko had no patience left for mincing words. “You’re fixated on her.”

“Do you know the problem with true AI?” Farrell leaned back. He reached for a pocket, briefly forgetting his hands were bound. “I don’t suppose you smoke?”

“No. Stop stalling.”

He huffed, put out at dealing with such a barbarian. “Artificial intelligences are not a deterministic summation of their programming. Inevitably, anomalies arise. Harmless quirks in those dedicated to cosmic simulations, advanced mathematics, and the like. Even charming at times. But combat…”

Alenko could guess. “They go crazy. Like the Hannibal system on Luna.”

“Bloody hell, does everyone know about that now?” He muttered something distinctly unflattering about the competence of navy researchers. “Yes, like Hannibal. While that incident was extreme, even the more subtle manifestations are… problematic.”

“Get to the point.” While he was no expert, he had basic education on AI systems in college. Nothing Farrell had said was particularly groundbreaking.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Farrell gestured. “Anomalies in an AI brain built, in part, from the aggregate data of human soldiers might be addressed by studying an anomalous human brain.”

Alenko’s stomach turned. Farrell continued, bitterly. “She caught on, naturally. There’s no such thing as competent help.”

It took him a moment to speak, honestly concerned he was about to be sick. Anomalous brain. Farrell wanted to mine Nathaly for the worst of her experiences and use them as a computer experiment. “If you brought me here to talk about Shepard, you’ll leave disappointed. You’re stuck with what you already have.”

“I brought you here to talk about you.” Farrell leaned towards him. “You don’t hate Cerberus. You didn’t mean to kill me, and you were glad I lived.”

Alenko was no longer certain of his relief at Farrell’s survival. “I didn’t want to kill a man in custody, so I must be a secret Cerberus supporter. Ok.”
“You’re more open-minded than you want to admit. That small act of mercy betrays a better nature. One that wants to improve the world.” Farrell gazed at him intently. “You have enough wits to see the Alliance squanders its opportunities- squanders you.”

“We’re done here.” Alenko moved towards the hatch. “I’m not your ticket back to Cerberus, and you’re not interested in talking.”

Farrell scoffed. “I’m at the tender mercies of your Alliance. They can’t even correctly torment a man- I’m about to die of boredom. Do you think I’d suffer them if I had a comm link sequestered away, waiting for the right bait?”

Alenko blinked. “That’s it.”

Farrell tilted his head. “Pardon?”

The transmission protocols Marshall found were Cerberus. Sure, they’d changed the details since the Nepheron raid- they weren’t idiots- but Alenko would bet money the protocols had the same author. Marshall had an intercepted Cerberus transmission sitting on his desk.

Farrell was thoroughly puzzled now, and curious. Alenko wiped the expression from his face. “Nothing. Good luck with SAMI. I hope their interrogation lives up to your expectations.”

As he was raising his hand to the door’s touchpad, Farrell said, “We could bring her back, you know.”

That was unexpected enough to startle him. He looked over his shoulder, more confused than shocked. “What?”

Farrell spoke steadily. “Shepard. We could… restore her.”

Alenko stared. Farrell sat back, and took on a more lecturing tone. “I specialize in cognitive neuroscience. I’ve spent my life pressing the boundary between the brain and the computer. We’re more alike than you know, humans and AI, even humans and VI- we all behave according to the demands of our hardware, the limits of our software, and the impetus of our experiences.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” he said at last. The idea was beyond insane. The long nights and longer days he’d spent wishing, longing, begging for Nathaly to come back in the darkest depths of his grief did nothing to change the fact that she was gone. “The Normandy went down almost a year ago. Even her body would be gone by now.”

Frictional drag against the atmosphere would have brought all the wreckage and its attendant dead crashing onto the Alchera ice months ago. Farrell remained untroubled. “The last project I led for SAMI was codenamed Osiris. We told the navy we were trying to improve mech combat VIs, but Osiris had loftier ambitions. The full fusion of the organic and the digital, to enhance our best agents and unlock the true potential of what it could mean to be human.” A bitter chuckle. “Not that your navy ever appreciated my work. They shut down Osiris, and forced us to seek out alternative resources.”

Captain Rahimi had mentioned Osiris last fall. She refused to describe the project to Alenko, and was concerned Farrell had. She hinted at Nathaly’s involvement, that Farrell had hurt her somehow.

Alenko kept a careful rein on his temper. The last thing he wanted was for Farrell to see he’d hit home. “They were right. Sounds more like you wanted to corrupt what it means to be human.”
“Speak for yourself. You’ve been altered,” Farrell said, referring to his biotic implant. “Capable of things no wholly natural human can achieve. Do you feel less human?”

“No sane person is opposed to medical devices.” Before the implant, regulating the dark energy his nervous system could command was fraught with difficulty, and self-injury wasn’t unusual. True, it also amplified his abilities, but it didn’t give him anything that wasn’t naturally there.

“Where do you draw the line?” Farrell shrugged. “All this is beside the point. Shepard was one of my most promising subjects. I have a lot of data on her. Even without her body, a simulation—”

“I’m not interested in a simulation. And I’m not interested in you.” He tagged the door. “Have fun rotting in SAMI’s basement.”

Andrysiak looked up as he came out. Alenko shook his head to hide how disturbed he truly was.

“More nonsense.”

She didn’t seem fooled. “You were in there a long time for nonsense.”

“Recruitment pitch.” He snorted, disgusted.

She titled her head, her hair falling over her cheek. “And?”

His eyebrows scrunched together, derailed. “What?”

Her mouth turned up at one corner. “Did you sign up?”

“Of course not.”

“I see.” She was amused for some reason Alenko couldn’t begin to fathom. “Your superiors will be pleased by your loyalty. I trust you can see your way out?”

He nodded curtly. Her smile grew. “A pleasure meeting you, Lieutenant.”

“He’s your problem now.” He shook her hand again, and departed.

Andrysiak watched him go, dismissed the marine guard, and glanced at her omni-tool. When a minute had passed, she went into the interrogation room.

Farrell glanced up, his instant look of irritation fading as he saw her. His eyes widened.

“Good news, doctor.” She helped him to his feet. “You’re going home.”

He harrumphed. “Took you long enough.”

“We had to wait for the right opportunity, like your transfer orders.” Her smile had a razor edge. “And for need of your particular skills to arise.”

Miranda found Jacob in D-wing, overseeing a full test-out of several Loki mechs. His faintly bored expression evaporated as she came through the hatch. “Hey.”

“We have a problem,” she said without preamble.

He glanced back at the test-in-progress. “Let’s step outside. My team’s got this.”
Miranda took stock of the hallway to ensure they were alone, before stepping towards Jacob. She kept her voice to an undertone. “I need you to keep eyes on Rasa. Preferably human, every moment she’s on the station. Cameras when she’s in her quarters.”

Jacob was taken aback. “Rasa? Isn’t she the Illusive Man’s pet?”

“She’s become my thorn. I’ve looked into the logs while she’s been away from the station.” Miranda sighed, ticking off her offenses on her fingers. “She’s tried to break into the servers multiple times. Testing boundaries, I thought at first, or marking her territory, but it hasn’t stopped. She’s obsessed with Shepard-”

“Miri, the whole damn station’s obsessed with Shepard. She’s the only reason any of us are here.”

“Surveillance shows she spends a great deal of time in the clone room. I caught her there myself last week, having a… a romantic assignation with Dr. Wilson.”

“Wilson?” Jacob couldn’t begin to take it seriously. “He doesn’t seem her type.”

Miranda wasn’t in the mood for jokes. “Rasa doesn’t have a type. She guards herself quite jealously. So if she’s involved with Wilson, you know there’s an ulterior motive hidden somewhere.”

He shrugged. “She’s tried sneaking into Shepard’s clean room, too. Think that’s why she’s getting close to Wilson?”

“Maybe.” Miranda frowned. “It feels more complicated.”

“You like making things complicated.” He spoke with the sincerity of a man who learned from direct experience.

She raised an eyebrow. “Would you think a lab tour was worth fucking Wilson?”

Jacob broke into laughter. She couldn’t hide a small smile of her own, despite herself. “Jacob, I don’t know what’s going on. But I want to. Can you take care of this?”

He collected himself enough to answer. “No problem. I’ll let you know if we find anything weird. Well, weirder.”

“Good.” She looked over at speaker as the VI announced a shuttle arrival. “Speak of the devil.”

“I’ll catch you later.” Jacob returned to his task.

Miranda made her way to the dock. The shuttle was just settling into its berth. She waited, resisting the urge to tap her foot, as the hatch slid aside.

A slender young woman with a cap of ash blonde hair exited. She raked her fingers through it. “I hate this color.”

Miranda couldn’t care less. “Did you succeed?”

Rasa turned and gestured to the shuttle with a flourish. A short man unfolded himself and stepped out, blinking at bright white of the station. Between his receding hairline, long face, and sparse goatee, he looked every inch the pompous academic she expected. “Dr. Farrell, I presume? Or would you prefer Dr. Archer?”

“I’ve been both for so long I no longer care, really.” He flashed her a small, rat-like grin. Then he
grew serious, demanding. “Where is my brother?”

“Where you left him when you went to make your report at Nepheron,” she answered, smoothly, with a hint of warning. The project needed what he had, but she wasn’t about to let him own the place. “He’s been looked after.”

“I want him brought here immediately.”

“In good time.” She folded her arms. “You’ve caused Cerberus quite a lot of trouble. I hope you came prepared to make amends.”

He held up the arm that contained his omni-tool implant. “My records on Osiris are all right here. You’ll find the encryption key in the lab on Chasca.” He turned to Rasa. “However, your lovely assistant declined to provide any details on this… urgent project.”

Rasa made a face at being called an assistant. Miranda disguised her curl of satisfaction. “One of your former patients is in need of your services.”

His interest sharpened. “Which?”

“Shepard.” Her answering smile said she knew she had him. Miranda nodded to Rasa. “My lovely assistant will escort you to Dr. Wilson’s office. He’ll brief you on our status.”

Rasa shot daggers at her, but took the doctor by the arm. Miranda watched them go, feeling good about the project for the first time since Shepard almost woke.
The Cerberus Raid

December 2184

Commander Alenko secured his D-clip to the line as Major Jackson’s easy drawl crackled over their comm link. “Report.”

All six of her team was on this run, at three entry points. Alenko’s partner, Private Green, nodded affirmation. Alenko activated the comm. “Bravo Team is go.”

“Charlie Team is go,” came the second reply, from Marshall.

“Alfa Team is go,” Jackson said. She paused, probably stepping back from her drop point. “Set charges on my mark. Three, two, one, mark.”

The explosives blew the seals on the skylights. This planet was oxygenated- no need for an emergency mass effect field over the breached windows- but he was certain alarms were sounding all over the Cerberus facility. The squad had done this more than a half dozen times since that original intercepted message last May, and the ones that followed, chasing down the two known Cerberus cells. Their intel suggested this facility was critical to the work, whatever it was- Cerberus’ purpose remained maddeningly elusive. They had no time to waste.

Alenko hooked the toe of his boot under the damaged skylight and levered it out of the way. Then he turned around and took a breath. *I have got to learn to do this without rope.*

He zipped down three stories into the southern wing of the facility.

This was the laboratory wing. This time of night, it was unoccupied, as planned. Green landed beside him with hardly a sound. They unclipped from the lines and flipped on their gun-mounted flashlights.

“Clear,” Jackson reported. Her two-man team had entered through a series of offices.

“Clear,” said Lieutenant Marshall, who was in the mess with French. In this complex, the barracks were located in an outbuilding- a small piece of luck.

Alenko was about to report the same, when a glint in his peripheral vision caught his attention. He drew back to the wall and aimed the light at the floor. “Two security, ten o’clock. Hardsuits. Can’t see weapons.”

“Patrol?” Green asked, crouching behind a counter.

“Probably.” They weren’t able to hack the facility’s systems well enough to know their security routines, but having the place patrolled at night was common sense.

Jackson came on the comm. “Eliminate the threat and proceed to the rendezvous point.”

“Copy that.” Alenko held his pistol in one hand and readied an attack in the other. He glanced at Green. “Quick and quiet.”

The pair of Cerberus guards had yet to notice them. They’d acted quickly to hide their lights and kept their voices to a whisper. The guards, by contrast, ambled down the hall, separated from the lab by a large sheet of plate glass, exchanging jibes and gossip. They carried their rifles loosely in
their hands. Alenko doubted they’d ever been asked to use them here, at this remote facility in the Traverse. It had taken months of digging to find its location.

The hatch slid open. The guards entered the facility.

The second the hatch closed behind them, Alenko’s biotic lift caught them squarely. The two men floated up towards the ceiling, wriggling and cursing in surprise. Green popped up over the counter and silenced the one on the left with three shots. Alenko got lucky, and managed to put his first shot through the helmet of the rightmost guard. They hung in midair a few moments longer, until the field expired and they fell with two solid thuds.

Alenko confirmed they were down. “Well, Cerberus sure knows we’re here now. Look- biometric sensors on the suits.”

“Think they’re wired to an alarm?”

“No reason they wouldn’t be. The sensors are the expensive part.” He held out his omni-tool to the dead men and keyed up a program. “Let me see if I can sync into their communications.”

It took the software fifteen seconds to find the frequency. Cerberus wasn’t using encryption, not here, not for local security at a secret facility. He frowned as he listened. “They’re converging on this location.”

“Then we’d better get to that rendezvous.”

They departed the lab and headed towards the back of the building. Alenko filled in Jackson as they walked. “Site security is mobilizing. They know their patrol is dead. We’re on borrowed time.”

“Copy that. We’re on the second story. Keep looking for the server room.”

The scan they performed from orbit gave them a detailed layout. What it did not tell them was the purpose of any of the smaller rooms. They knew from the electromagnetic signature the servers were located towards the rear, but not precisely where, so they’d entered from three locations to sweep the area as quickly as possible. The information they sought would be in that room.

Unrest in the Terminus Systems was nothing new- but raids, attacks, and kidnappings were on the rise since the end of the Geth War, and navy intelligence was concerned. The situation escalated as entire human colonies fell silent, one by one- only human colonies. Seven since the end of the war with the most recent, Cyrene, representing over five thousand people simply disappeared. Small as colonies went but still unfathomable by the standards of abductions. Lazarus’ spending had risen concordantly.

Politics forced the Systems Alliance to be discreet in investigation and offers of aid. Terminus colonies were outside their jurisdiction and made the Council leery. But they couldn’t afford to ignore targeted assaults on this scale, not when the enemy remained unknown and their own border colonies in the Traverse were so vulnerable.

All they knew was that the mass abductions were clean. None of the colonies showed signs of a struggle. So far, there were no survivors to bear witness. Advanced technology had to be involved, and Cerberus was nothing if not deeply interested in exotic tech, and their labs on Nepheron and elsewhere demonstrated an appetite for human test subjects. And on Cyrene, they found evidence Cerberus had been there before them.

Or so the story went. Alenko’s major problem was the numbers- Cerberus just wasn’t large
enough to make use of thousands of test subjects, no matter their recent spending spree. None of the known players were.

Charlie Team radioed in. “Encountering resistance in the north wing.” Gunfire over the comm. Marshall’s voice was tight. “They’re trying to flank us. I think they know what we’re after.”

Jackson. “Can you reach the extraction point?”

“Affirmative.”

“Keep them off us as long as you can, then make for the shuttle.” Jackson paused. “Alenko, what’s your ETA?”

“Two minutes,” he answered, estimating.

Green glanced down the hallway behind them. Short and burly, he blocked most of the way. “Cerberus coming up hot on our six.”

Alenko looked over his shoulder. “Damn, they’re fast.”

He turned in place and flung out his hand, feeling the dark energy course down his arm. The Cerberus guards froze as his stasis field took them. “It won’t last long. We need to get to Jackson.”

“And hope we can hold the room long enough,” said Green. They both knew the data they came for would take time to download— if they could crack the server to start with.

Major Jackson radioed in. “Found the room. Locked, of course. Blowing it now.”

Alenko heard a small explosion from up ahead. They rounded the corner and saw a puff of smoke drifting from a half-open hatch. They pushed through with their weapons raised.

It was a private office. The expensive wood and leather indicated it belonged to a high-ranking member of the base, as did the lack of clutter. Only people who focused exclusively on the “big picture” could afford to have a working space so devoid of actual work. There was, however, one curiosity on the polished chondrite surface of the desk.

Alenko picked it up and turned it over in his hand. It measured maybe a dozen centimeters long and half as wide, segmented like trilobite and fashioned with small, jointed grips on each side—as though it were designed to fit over something flexible and tubular. Four holes drilled through the corners provided anchor points. Channels drilled lengthwise served as conduits for long fibers, flowing out of it in a gossamer cloud. Alenko flipped it over. The underside was laced with computer circuits. The device was alien, elegant, and entirely puzzling.

Jackson appeared in a hatch at the rear of the office. “Good, you’re here. We’re having problems with the server.”

Alenko groaned, and shoved the device in a utility pouch. “Perfect.” He glanced at Green. “You’re on watch. Anything comes through the door, shoot it.”

He set his gun. “Yes, sir.”

Alenko followed Jackson into the back room. This space was far more utilitarian, the lights unresponsive or non-existent. Electronic cables ran in bundles over the floor, walls, and ceiling. A dozen server racks blipped away in the darkness. The sole illumination came from the flashlights
of Jackson and her support, Private North. North was unsuccessfully prompting the server using the Alliance-provided software uploaded to her omni-tool, her deep onyx complexion rendering her barely a profile in its orange glow.

Jackson nodded to Alenko. “We don’t have much time. They’re using some new protocol- one we haven’t seen before. We’ve got maybe ten minutes before we’ll have to evac.”

“Understood.” He opened his omni-tool and started to query the server himself.

The comm crackled- Marshall again. “No joy. Private French is wounded. Withdrawing to the evac point.”

“Copy that.” Jackson glanced at Alenko and North. “Five minutes now. I’ll support Green. Get that data.”

She raised her rifle and strode from the server room. North looked up. “Sir. They’re using a quantum encryption algorithm.”

“That’s not possible-” Alenko skinned the diagnostic report on her omni-tool. “And they have geographic signature? What is this place?”

“Darn it.” North tapped away frantically at the server terminal. “We can’t just take the gear and bolt. By the time we got it back to Alliance space, the drives would be auto-wiped.”

“Well, we’re not going to break this encryption here, either.”

Gunfire erupted from the office. Alenko put his hand in his pouch, touching the strange device, with the beginnings of an idea. “North- access to facility systems is only protected externally. Blow the power and whatever else you can. Cerberus security isn’t carrying flashlights.”

North grinned. “Roger that.”

“Then overload the servers. Don’t leave footprints.”

“We’re just giving up on the data?”

“I’m going to try another way in.” He gave her a push towards the terminal. “Do it.”

Alenko ran into the office. Jackson and Green were taking turns at the door, stepping out to fire at whatever stood at the end of the hall, pulling back when their shield failed while the other marine took over. Alenko flipped open the desktop terminal.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Jackson said, panting against the wall as her shield regenerated. “We’re low on thermal clips.”

“You and me both,” Alenko muttered.

He was in luck. The encryption on the manager’s account was nowhere near as tough as what guarded the servers themselves. Since remote access to the servers had first-rate security, Cerberus probably figured rigorous protection of terminals inside the facility was unnecessary and impractical. Alenko began to upload to local storage aboard the shuttle. That way, even if they all died here, their pilot could take some of the data with her.

Jackson slid back from the door again, Green taking her station. “How much longer?”

“Until we get the signal.” Alenko didn’t look up from his work.
“What signal?”

The lights went out. Private North came barreling out of the server room. Alenko stepped away from the now-useless terminal. “That one.”

“We gotta move!” North said.

“Everyone out!” Alenko sprinted for the hatch. Jackson stepped out and sprayed bullets down the hall, preventing the disoriented Cerberus guards from advancing as the team slipped out behind her. Then she, too, turned and ran.

Their flashlight beams bounced over the walls and floor as the four marines raced for the exit. The alarm system blared full-tilt throughout the facility, while a Cerberus VI attempted to give guidance to facility personnel over the building PA. Behind the Alliance squad, there were shouts and the clatter of hardsuit boots shuffling over the floor in the dark, with the occasional cry or curse as they bumped into one another.

North stumbled as they rounded a corner at breakneck speed. Green hauled her up. Alenko turned and threw a biotic attack down the hall, knocking their pursuit off their feet. “Go!”

They accelerated forward.

The VI seemed designed to guide endangered scientists to the exits in the event of an emergency—not direct blind guards to an incursion. That worked in their favor in the unfamiliar layout. Any path the VI illuminated in low orange emergency lighting, they avoided, scampering through the facility in the pitch black of a barely-inhabited world at night. The guards were hard-pressed to follow.

Jackson spoke into her comm as they ran. “Need a pick-up!”

Their pilot, Velasquez, radioed back. “Copy that. I’ve got your transponder. ETA two minutes.”

The hatch before them opened on a surprised pair of Cerberus techs, making coffee to aid the midnight oil. Without hesitation the nearest of them threw the pot at the squad. Green ducked. Alenko swiped over Green’s head and tossed them both against the cabinets. They collapsed on the ground. Jackson surged forward, North at her side. “You got Charlie Team?”

Velasquez confirmed. “Roger, Marshall and French aboard, over.”

“We need an exit,” Green grunted.

Alenko was in top shape, but between the rapid retreat and the biotic fire, he was quickly losing steam. He panted. “Should be near the perimeter now—“

The corridor dead-ended on a balcony. Jackson threw her arm across her eyes and raised her gun. “Get down!”

Alenko managed to get his head tucked to his chest before she shot out the glass. Most of it fell onto the floor below, but a pressure differential sent some of it back at the marines. It tinkled off him as he approached the edge. Jackson had already waved Green and North over. “Go!”

He jumped, and landed hard, half-roll and half-fall. Really, really got to learn how to do that with biotics.

Jackson landed beside him and rolled into a crouch- a perfectly executed landing. She grabbed his
arm and hauled him to his feet.

Green gestured with his rifle. “Window to the outside over there.”

“Let’s go.” Jackson held her hand to her ear as they hurried over. “Velasquez!”

“I got you,” said their pilot. “Thirty seconds. Be ready. They’re scrambling more men from the barracks.”

“Shit.” Jackson nodded to her squad. “Break the windows. We break cover when the shuttle lands.”

North crouched below a window. “We’re so boned.”

“Quiet,” Jackson said. But her eyes lingered on her with some concern- North shook a bit as they waited, her nerves taking hold now that there was nothing to do. Sometimes this felt like a far cry from the Normandy. Nobody on this squad was picked so much as ended up here.

Alenko risked a peek. Cerberus guards in their white hardsuits spilled over the field surrounding the facility. His squad was in some kind of library, directly across from the barracks. He kept his voice low. “They haven’t seen us yet.”

Jackson popped in a fresh thermal clip. “That won’t last long. I hope Velasquez is ready to take some fire.”

“I think she kind of enjoys it,” Green muttered.

“Enough of that,” Jackson ordered, not without a hint of amusement. They all knew their pilot hated feeling left out of the action.

She didn’t disappoint. No sooner did Alenko hear the scream of the shuttle engines than artillery fire began taking the guards to pieces. They scrambled for cover- but out in the open, there weren’t many places to go. Velasquez swept the shuttle in a neat arc as she descended, mowing down the men pouring from the barracks and forcing them to retreat, and didn’t stop until the shuttle settled on the ground and its own safety protocols shut off the gun.

Jackson fired at the glass as the side of the shuttle slid open. Marshall waved them forward.

Jackson nodded to Green. “Move!”

Green vaulted the window. By the time he was halfway to the shuttle, Cerberus was starting to get its act together. Alenko lifted several of them into the air where Jackson and North made short work of them.

Marshall hauled Green aboard. Jackson ejected her heat sink and slammed in another. “North, go!”

North ran out over the field. A lucky hit blew out her shield generator just before she reached the safety of the shuttle’s shadow. Alenko nailed the guard who shot her a moment later.

“Alenko, go!” Jackson fired over the windowsill.

He threw himself out the window and hit the ground running, tearing up the grass. There was no thought of defensive fire. It would only sacrifice speed. He tucked his rifle to his chest and made a quick mnemonic gesture, summoning a barrier. Alenko stumbled as a bullet struck it, and then
another, each impact taking a little of his energy with it.

Then he was at the shuttle. Marshall reached out and pulled him aboard. He looked back out across the field. Jackson appeared in the window.

From up front, Velasquez said, “They’re regrouping!”

Alenko looked at Green. “She’s not going to make it.”

“We’ve got her back. Come on.”

They stepped out and used the shuttle itself as cover while Jackson raced across the field. Alenko willed himself not to look over his shoulder and check her progress. Taking his eyes off Cerberus for even a second would mean at least one of them took a bullet. There were too many of them.

Cerberus was almost in flanking position when he heard boots thump on the shuttle’s metal floor. Jackson was not pleased. “Get your asses back on this shuttle!”

Green and Alenko complied with all due haste. Alenko still had one foot on the ground when Velasquez began her ascent. Jackson hauled him inside. The door slammed shut. An instant later, he was nearly knocked off his feet as Velasquez laid the hammer down. The rattle of gunfire on their hull faded away.

Jackson folded her arms and glared at her two officers. Some glass had caught on her cheek, leaving a vivid red cut in her pale pink skin. “That wasn’t in the plan, gentlemen.”

“Neither was you getting shot,” Alenko said. Marshall chuckled.

She frowned, crossly, but turned her attention to other matters. “How badly is French injured?”

The young woman was strapped into a jump seat, ghostly white and clutching at a med pack affixed to the right side of her hardsuit. Alenko was abruptly reminded of Addison Chase, laying in the med tent on the surface of Alchera. His stomach twisted.

“Bullet entered clean,” Marshall said. “I think the impact broke a rib or two, but nothing serious.”

French looked up at Jackson. “I’ll hold together, ma’am.”

“Good.” The shuttled started to rattle as they gained altitude. Jackson reached overhead and grabbed hold of a cross-brace. “What did we get?”

Alenko likewise held onto the track for the hatch. “Not sure yet. We copied as much of the locked-down server as we could. It’ll take time to process all the data.”

Green glanced at him. “Didn’t you grab something off the desk?”

Alenko had almost forgotten the strange device. He unzipped his utility pouch and held it out to his C.O. “This was in the office near the terminal.”

Her brow furrowed as she turned it back and forth, failing to make any sense of it. “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s got an awful strange sheen to it. Oily… but it feels dry.”

North shuddered. “Makes my hair stand on end.”

Alenko glanced between North and the device and got a sudden sinking feeling. Jackson noticed. “You look like you just found a turd in a punchbowl.”
I-“ He wasn’t sure what he thought. The trepidation it gave him was familiar, the same feeling whenever the Normandy encountered an esoteric geth device in the Traverse. And they knew that tech screwed with people’s heads, and they learned it from reapers. “I think it’s dangerous. We shouldn’t play with it.”

Marshall agreed. “Let the geeks figure it out back home.”

Jackson handed it back to Alenko. “Keep it safe-“

In her seat, Corporal French jerked upright and began to hyperventilate. Her hands clutched spasmodically over her wound.

Marshall shot a glance at their indicators. “We just broke atmo.”

Jackson was on her knees, pulling at the corporal’s restraints. “Damn it. We were over two atmospheres down there.”

Everyone with basic field response training understood that human wounds reacted differently to the various conditions one commonly encountered out in space, rapid pressure changes included. Marshall rushed to help her. Alenko opened a panel in the bulkhead. “Where’s the med kit?”

“Up here,” Velasquez called. He found it lying on the empty copilot seat, where Marshall left it after French’s initial treatment. Alenko slammed it shut and carried it aft.

North and Green had cleared back, leaving the floor open. The corporal was laid out on the sheet metal. Marshall bent over French’s head. Her eyes were wide and glassy. He patted her face, trying to get her attention. “Corporal. Faye- blink if you can hear me.”

She managed to blink, once, slowly, her face bone white. Jackson checked the electronic tag on the med pack. “Shit. The pack’s soaked.”

“Can’t take it off, then. It’ll just make the bleeding worse.” Marshall shook his head. “Gotta work around it.”

French’s eyes rolled from one person to the next. Each breath shallower than the last.

Alenko held out the med kit. Jackson snagged it and snapped it open. “I can pump some coagulant to the wound site.”

She slid the syringe between the pack and her skin and sunk the plunger home. It came out wet. Alenko took it, swabbed a paper strip, and inserted it into the portable scanner. “This isn’t good.”

Jackson untangled a line of IV tubing. “What?”

The scanner flashed a warning- a probable diagnosis. “It’s showing bile. I think it hit her liver.”


Jackson helped him get her turned. “Green! North! Find the cocoon!”

Every shuttle carried an immobilizing medical pod. It was the closest thing small spacecraft had to a medical center.

Green stared in disbelief. “You want to put a woman in this condition in a cocoon?”
“If her liver’s bleeding this badly, she’s dead before we leave the system.” Jackson inserted the IV. “We need to put her in stasis. Get it now.”

The two men rushed to comply. Alenko retreated into the flight area—enough to be out of the way, but still able to watch. He hated being helpless.


They heaved the young woman into the pod and settled her on her back. French was completely unresponsive, a woman made of rubber and going blue at the edges. Marshall was ashen. “God, her blood pressure’s through the floor.”

Jackson looped the line through the cocoon’s port and clipped it off. “Help me get her sealed.”

Marshall began fastening the cover over her head, while Jackson worked down towards her feet. Alenko watched French’s unnaturally passive face disappear.

“Pressure test,” Jackson said.

“We’re green,” Marshall announced after a moment. “Initiating stasis procedures.”

Medical stasis was a different condition from the one Alenko brought down on his opponents in combat. It held indefinitely. The patient’s bodily processes would slow to a crawl. Her heart would beat only once every several minutes— but it wouldn’t matter, because the metabolism of every cell in her body, from stomach to brain, would be similarly sluggish. Her greatly lowered pulse would slow the bleeding. Four times an hour, she’d take a single breath, the pod forcing air in and out of her lungs.

The cocoon beeped four times. Marshall checked the indicators. “She’s in stasis.”

Jackson let out a breath and sat back, suit spattered with French’s blood. Green folded his arms. North sat down in one of the jump seats and ran her hands over her face. Alenko watched Marshall put his hand on top of the pod.

“I told her to move up,” Marshall said, to no one in particular, with no particular inflection. At that moment he looked older than his forty-some years— the tired, sweat-soaked fuzz of his hair, the drooping flesh around his eyes, the strain in his breath. “We should’ve held until that group was down. Too worried about the clock.”

Alenko was the first to find a reply. “And if you hadn’t tried to speed it up, maybe Cerberus would’ve caught you in the back, and neither of you would be here.”

“You can’t second-guess what happens in combat,” Jackson added. “Learn from it if you can, but don’t ever think you could’ve changed it.”

Alenko thought about the Normandy in flames, Shepard in the battery, screaming at him to go, and wondered as he still did most days why he’d listened. He sank into the co-pilot couch and stared out at the stars. “She’s right, but it’s ok if it’s not that easy.”

Not quite a week later, Jackson, Alenko, and Marshall stood in Rear Admiral Cook’s office at HQ aboard the Citadel, while he read through their report.
He finished the last sentence- Cook prided himself on his thoroughness- and set the data pad down, square to the desk, precisely three centimeters from the edge. He looked at each of the three officers in turn and raised his eyebrows. “Major Jackson.”

She straightened. “Sir.”

“Am I to understand that you not only got caught, but all you got was this?” He hefted the strange device in his hand, and dropped back on the desk with an audible clunk.

Jackson pursed her lips. “Sir, I think you’ll find the data we collected-“

“Fuck your data.” Cook widened his gaze to include all three of them. “I’ve got a marine with one foot in the morgue, and a whole op blown wide open. Months of work, ruined, for a database and some cheap tech. We’re nowhere close to identifying who’s behind our vanishing colonies or bringing them to justice. We still have no notion of how this so-called Lazarus Project is connected.”

“You approved the raid,” she protested.

“Because I thought your discretion would outweigh your tenacity.” He shifted some paperwork on his desk. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. I suppose I thought you were different from the other reckless jarheads they raise up in ICT.”

She crossed her arms, shaking her head. Marshall cleared his throat, but held his silence. Alenko watched the both of them in disbelief. He’d witnessed Cook’s disparaging attitude before, but this was the first time he’d seen the colonel ream out his command like this. Evidently it was old news to Marshall and Jackson.

He decided he had to say something. “Sir, if you’d let me take a closer look at that, I’m sure I could figure it out.”

Cook glanced again at the device. “You have some idea what the hell this is?”

Alenko hadn’t had much time to look at the data, so he took a shot in the dark, based on what he did know. “It’s medical.”

Cook laughed. “That’s it?”

“Let me hook it up to some equipment, run a few diagnostics, and I’ll tell you the rest.”

Cook studied him a long moment. Then he tossed the device at him. “Fine. Play it with it all you want. I’ve got other news.”

Alenko picked it up, skin crawling as it touched his bare hand, and stuffed it into a pocket it didn’t quite fit just to stop holding it. Jackson shrugged at him- a way of saying nice try. Marshall remained stone-faced, waiting for it to be over.

Cook continued unperturbed. “French is looking at a medical discharge. Incompetent though you may be, I can’t have one of my squads running around a person short. So I requested a replacement.” He raised his voice, looking to the door. “Enter.”

Nguyen walked in. Alenko passed his hand over his eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Cook ignored the non-sequitur. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Sergeant Nguyen An Tuyet. She joins us from the SSV Agincourt. I am certain that she will fill Corporal French’s shoes
admirably."

Nguyen put her hands on her hips and nodded at them, a bright and snotty smile on her face. Alenko rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Dismissed,” Cook said. They filed out of his office.

Jackson and Marshall headed back to the pit, to their own desks. Nguyen and Alenko were left in the corridor outside the office. She sized him up. “Staff Commander, huh. Guess they’ll promote anyone these days.”

“Are we going to have a problem?” he asked, bluntly, with no patience for her theatrics.

She crossed her arms. “Dunno. They cure you of whatever makes you want to beat guys to death?”

“Did they cure you of whatever leaves you constantly spoiling for a fight?”

They stared each other down for a long moment. Then Nguyen laughed. “There’s no problem. I’ll see you, Alenko.”

She sauntered down the hall. As she walked, her prosthetic arm changed from a neutral golden tan matching her skin to a bold splash of bright colors resembling a full sleeve tattoo- off the clock, for now.

Her departure did nothing to ease his growing sense of trepidation. However, there wasn’t much he could do but wait and see if she chose to make a stink. He felt the device through the cloth, weighing it in his hand, and headed back to his desk.

Jackson was speaking quietly to their team. “I got an update. French is back in surgery at Zakera Medical Center. We called her sister, but she’s on Benning and can’t get here.”

“I’ll sit at the hospital,” Marshall volunteered, immediately, before Jackson could ask.

“Thank you.” Jackson looked at the rest of them. “We should-“

“Can I come with?” North piped up, rather unexpectedly. Alenko blinked.

Marshall was likewise disconcerted. “Sure. I’ll get a cab.”

They gathered up their things. Jackson resumed. “As I was saying, the rest of us should get some sleep. This has been a hard week, and this data won’t stay fresh for long. Cerberus will have figured out what we got by now and begun adapting. I need everyone here bright and early tomorrow.”

Green nodded and took off. Alenko held up the device. “I’m going to hang around and see what I can get from this.”

Jackson shrugged. “As you like.”

He found his undersuit gloves and pulled them on before staring his inspection. Jackson sat back down at her own desk and inserted their OSD of stolen data. Apparently, sleep wasn’t on her mind, either. It was late; even the janitorial staff had left. The only sounds were Alenko’s careful attempts to pry apart the device, and Jackson’s fingertips hitting the desk at irregular intervals as they slammed through the haptic keyboard with excessive force.
After listening to this for the better part of ten minutes, Alenko suggested, tentatively, “Rough day?”

“Rough month,” she snorted. “Rough year.”

“In ’83 I lost two marines chasing Saren and six more when the ship went down.”

“And?” she asked tersely.

“I’m glad French is going to make it, that’s all.” He shrugged. “Because it doesn’t get easier with experience.”

She pushed back from her desk, ran her hand over her militant braid. Alenko estimated she was in her late thirties and sometimes it really showed. Tonight she looked exhausted, the broad gray streaks in her honey-blonde hair ghostly in the half-lit office. “Sixteen years in, thirteen years in Rio, and I spend half my time commanding a desk and the other half trying to pull off big boy ops with kids who barely know which end of the rifle to hold.”

Scuttlebutt held that Jackson came out of spec ops, but until Cook’s jab earlier that evening, Alenko hadn’t given that rumor much credit. It was hard to see how she’d end up here. The work was valuable, but niche and unprestigious and not infrequently dull- a place for misfits. “Was it like this when you started here?”

“Cook was in command then, too. That’s all I’ll say.” She chuckled, a slight shade of embarrassment, as if she already regretted the small outburst. “Marshall’s been here the longest, since before they authorized field ops. A real desk jockey.”

Understanding dawned. “That’s why they brought you in to lead the squad.”

“I didn’t have much choice for Citadel posts.”

“You like living on the Citadel that much?” Alenko had grown used to it, but it was loud, and crowded. He missed going outside. He missed the ability to truly be alone with himself. The wards had no sun, and even the artificial daylight of the Presidium had no warmth.

She hesitated. “My husband’s sick. His doctors are here. And he needs me here, too.”

“I’m sorry.”

Jackson shrugged, a little too stiff to be believed. “It used to not be so bad.”

He bit his lip. “If you don’t mind me asking…”

“A neurodegenerative disorder from growing up on one of those illegal mining worlds back in the ‘50s. He was already in the chair when we met, but he could still take care of himself. Now…” She trailed off, looking at nothing in particular. “You know, we talked about this on our second date. Because it already felt like we’d been in love two hundred years and I needed to know what it would be like when it got bad, and he needed to know I wasn’t gonna run.”

For a moment, he was back on Feros, sitting on the rooftop of the Prothean ruins that covered the planet, drinking with Nathaly into the night as she talked about her life. How the cipher made the beacon’s vision clearer, the horrors that were to come, and openly wondering if this was why her personal life had always seemed so disappointing compared to her professional career. Whether that was the universe trying to prepare her for this coming war, so she could make the sacrifices it required.
Alenko tried to answer with something supportive, but inside his head, all he could think was how much better his own life seemed since he met her. Hoping maybe she felt the same way even if that was too much to confess.

He looked down at the mess of wiring without really seeing it. “It was like that with my girlfriend. From the start we’d talk like we’d known each other our whole lives. It was so damn easy, even though it should’ve been hard.”

Jackson was surprised. He did mention her on rare occasions, though not by name, because it was better than pretending she never existed. But he was seldom so open. “You’ve never said what happened to her.”

“She was killed in action, towards the end of the war. Kinda always knew it would end like that. Not that it helped.” He cleared his throat, abruptly embarrassed, both by how it sounded and realizing he’d never actually said any of this out loud. “I know it’s not healthy. At this point I’ve mourned her longer than we were together. But…”

“She was your person,” Jackson said, simply. Succinctly. “You never really give up your person, even when no one understands it. When I married Brent, my own mother told me I was throwing my life away.”

Her computer beeped, drawing her attention and sparing him any reply. She straightened in her chair. “Oh, this is interesting.”

“You’ve got something?” He pushed away from his desk and craned his neck at her screen.

“Think so.” She turned it towards him. “This was a research facility. Knew that already.”

“Armageddon?” Their findings at Cyrene after the colony’s abduction hinted at so-called Armageddon cell, though it was impossible to say if that was from the raid or Cerberus’ interference afterwards. They’d hoped to learn more about its purpose. Cerberus kept its internal structure irritatingly close to the chest.

“Sure is.” Jackson pointed at the screen. “They were shipping tech out to other labs, including Lazarus. But the new bit here is they were also receiving tech, from a cell called Nephilim.”

His brow furrowed. She typed a few more queries. “Doesn’t look like it’s quite the money pit Lazarus is.”

“But the Illusive Man has billions tied up in Lazarus. If it’s research, that could explain how they’d use so many subjects.”

“Maybe.” Jackson kept reading. “Nephilim’s paramilitary. They’ve sent them all sorts of things—data, prototypes, even cell cultures. What in tarnation do a bunch of Cerberus commandos do with a petri dish?”

“Some kind of bio-weapon?” Alenko hazarded.

“I don’t know. There’s a lot of database left to go.”

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. “They pick some weird names.”

“Biblical references. Armageddon, the end of the world. Lazarus, the story of bringing the dead man back to life.” Jackson’s mouth quirked. “Maybe the Illusive Man wants to live forever.”
Alenko shook his head, still serious. “Everyone knows those. I don’t recognize Nephilim.”

She sighed and turned towards him, pushing the hair off her face. “Speaking as a good Baptist, Nephilim are Old Testament myths- the kind one doesn’t bring up in polite company.”

“Baptist, huh?” Well, that explained the drawl. Sometimes Jackson sounded like she’d walked straight out of a peach orchard.

“My mother naming me Mary Jean didn’t give it away?” She was bemused. “What about you?”

“Dad’s the Christian-flavored kind of secular, mom’s Buddhist. So I’m mostly just confused.”

She laughed. He said, “Tell me about Nephilim.”

“What I recall from my Sunday School days is that they were kind of… half-demons. The children of Cain lay with fallen angels, and the fruit of those unholy unions were the Nephilim. One part the children of god, one part corrupted.” Jackson shrugged. “I couldn’t say what attracted Cerberus to the term.”

Alenko couldn’t make any more sense of it than her. “Trust Cerberus to be dramatic.”

“You can say that twice. There’s comm logs from that base in here- some of it’s better than a soap opera.” She turned the terminal screen back to her, and kept working a few more minutes. “What do you make of our new marine?”

The question was unexpected, and it threw him off. “What about her?”

“You were on the Agincourt, and I couldn’t help but notice you weren’t overjoyed to see her.” Tactfully avoiding any mention that he’d held that post less than two months.

“It was right after my girlfriend died, and my ship was destroyed,” he said, shortly. “I wasn’t at my best and she made sure I knew it.”

Jackson winced. “It never rains but it pours.”

“It wasn’t exactly the greatest summer of my life.”

She glanced at him. “Something you need me to sort out before she starts?”

“I’ll be fine.” To change the subject, Alenko got up and started reading the stolen data over her shoulder. He frowned. “What that?”

She looked where he pointed. “The lab just sent a shipment to another Cerberus project. Some kind of valuable artifact out of the Terminus Systems, to help with their research.”

His brow furrowed. “What kind of artifact?”

“It doesn’t say. Could be Prothean. The tech’s rare but there’s a healthy black market trade in it outside Council Space.”

“Or reaper,” Alenko said, more to himself than to her. The strange device they secured from the lab brooded on his desk with an almost tangible weight on the air.

Jackson tilted her head. “Reaper? Those things Anderson goes on about, claiming Sovereign wasn’t just a ship?”
“Sovereign wasn’t just a ship. It was a member of a hostile synthetic race that eradicated the Protheans.”

She leaned back in her chair and laced her fingers behind her head. “The Council and about a dozen prominent investigations disagree.”

“None of them spoke to Sovereign. I did. None of them heard the truth straight from a fifty thousand year old Prothean VI.” Alenko watched her steadily, quite serious. “You don’t have to believe it. I know what I experienced.”

Jackson weighed things, and decided it wasn’t worth the argument. She resumed typing. “Personally, I think Cerberus is more likely to be involved in these disappearances than ancient machines.”

“You may be right. We’re at a dead end though, unless you have more information on that artifact.”

Her mouth turned up at the corner. “A destination. Trident.”
Alenko slid into the booth and offered a tired apology. “Sorry I’m late.”

Garrus raised his glass in reply. It had a finger of whiskey left. “It’s not like I have anywhere else to be. After the day I had, it’s just nice to be sitting down.”

“I hear that.” He took in his old friend. “What the hell happened to you?”

Garrus fingered the scrape on his face. Half his colony markings had flaked off, giving him a lopsided appearance. “Busted a smuggling op down in the docks. Asari-run, usually high class. I wasn’t expecting krogan security.”

“Surprised you look that good after a run-in with a krogan.”

“This? No. This was from a bunch of crates falling on me when I ducked out of the way of a frontal charge.”

One of Garrus’ eyes was squeezed shut by a swollen bruise. In as much as turians could bruise, with their leathery skin; the subcutaneous damage must be extensive. Alenko sized him up. “That’s more than a few crates.”

“Well.” He looked faintly embarrassed. “Taking out the guards maybe required a little hand-to-hand. Of course when I got back to HQ all I heard about was the amount of paperwork a couple of shootings was going to create. My supervisor could tell I was getting close to snapping and told me to take the rest of the afternoon.”

Alenko raised his eyebrows. “So you came here early for a little contemplation?”

“The drinks aren’t bad,” he said, taking a sip.

The waitress interrupted before Alenko could inquire which number he was on. He glanced hastily at the menu. “Uh, scotch, neat.”

“We have over a dozen terran varieties-“

“Whatever’s open is fine.” Bars on the Citadel, catering to so many species from so many diverse worlds, often wouldn’t unseal less-demanded products until ordered. This usually came with a hefty fee. Alenko hadn’t fully understood this point at first and was still rather irritated over the extra cost incurred those first several weeks after he started dragging himself out of his apartment early last year.

The waitress frowned, but took the order to the bar. Alenko turned back to Garrus. “Seriously. I remember how you felt about C-Sec when you came aboard the Normandy. I assumed you’d worked all that out when you went back.”

“And your relationship with the Alliance navy is completely uncomplicated, right?” Garrus leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. The fight in his apartment over a year ago was long forgotten. “How is the new post working out? You’ve been there awhile now.”

Alenko shifted in his seat. “It’s… okay. Not the same as the Normandy.”
“Netted you a promotion, I heard. Congrats.”

“Thanks.” He frowned. “The job feels slow in comparison to chasing Saren. But the work’s interesting.”

“Getting more so all the time.” Garrus quirked a mandible, not without sympathy. “Heard one of your colonies was attacked.”

“Disappeared, more like.” Alenko shook his head. “It’s the damnedest thing. 5000 people just… gone. It wasn’t Alliance, technically, but still human. Feels like it was our job to do something.”

“When I did my mandatory service, a turian colony out there got wasted by mercs. My ship was two days away. Our captain wouldn’t do anything. Said it wasn’t our jurisdiction.” He made a disgusted sound.

Alenko politely didn’t comment there was no turian relay he could recall that was only two days from the Terminus at FTL speeds. Everyone knew all governments of the council races made forays into the Terminus. Everyone agreed to tacitly ignore it unless they were stupid enough to make a scene. “A lot of people have been trying to piece it together, under the table, but the navy won’t authorize any serious investigation. They’re barely letting us go up to the hairy edge of the Traverse. They keep saying the Terminus isn’t our problem.”

The waitress returned with his scotch. He took a cautious sip, and then more enthusiastic one. “And Cyrene wasn’t even the first. Something’s been picking off tiny human colonies out there for the past year. Even the farmers are arming themselves.”

Garrus sat back. “You think it’s Cerberus?”

“It doesn’t seem like their M.O., but anything’s possible.” He scowled. “They’ve been busy lately, that’s for sure.”

“The lab on Trident?”

“Yeah.” A muscle worked in his jaw. Officially, the lab was discovered and shut down by the Trident planetary government. Unofficially, his squad found it in shipment logs from their raid in December, and provided ground support during the op. Alenko wasn’t inclined to care much about OPSEC at the moment. “They held a couple dozen human biotics there for nine months, using them as guinea pigs for medical experiments. Autopsies in progress in their morgue showed signs of brain hemorrhage around their implants. Severe biotic overexertion.”

“Shit. I hope you got the bastards.”

“Only one.” His face was grim. They hadn’t even found a trace of Lazarus to balance things out. Just more of Armageddon, which lacked the huge financial footprint to justify the abductions. “And we had to leave him in the custody of the colonial government. Politics.”

“So Cerberus will have him out in no time.”

“I hope not.” His tone, however, was more resigned than hopeful.

“They’ve been attacking the quarian fleet, too. Nearly got the Idenna four months back.”

Alenko was alarmed. “Tali-“

“-is fine,” Garrus answered quickly. “Physically, anyway. She took it hard. One of her good
friends from childhood was on board.”

“I didn’t know.” Guilt colored his face. “I haven’t written her. I haven’t really kept in touch well with anyone.”

Garrus shrugged. “I could beat you up about it, because it’s annoying as hell, but nobody really held it against you. And I get that it’s hard to pick those things back up once you’ve got your head straight again. Too much time and all that. Maybe some ugly reminders too.”

“No.” He sighed. “I mean, yes, but not in a bad way. I’m just… not ready yet. To remember with other people. And that’s all anyone asks about.”

He was nervous that Garrus would point out it had been a year and a half, but he didn’t. “Speaking of which. Did you see that abomination outside?”

The restaurant was on the main drag in Tayseri Ward. Advertising holos and kiosks were everywhere. The one directly outside the door had been rented out by the Systems Alliance Navy and their chosen marketing sprite was a composite VI wearing Shepard’s face.

Alenko took another drink. “Yes.”

“Makes sense from a PR standpoint,” Garrus said. “She’s the most recognizable hero you’ve got, galactically-speaking. Maybe persuade a few humans to think about enlisting and remind a few non-humans that your navy saved their asses.”

“It’s no excuse for exploiting her like that.”

“No argument here.” Garrus held up his hands. “I’ve been listening to that damn thing all afternoon. Surprised we can’t hear it now.”

“Maybe they turned the volume down,” Alenko offered neutrally.

Garrus evaluated him for a long moment. “You disabled it, didn’t you. That was why you were a few minutes late.”

When he walked by, the ad’s software pulled his identity from the extranet. It pronounced his name perfectly, in Nathaly’s own voice, reassembled from digital analysis of everything she’d ever said in front of a recorder. “She saluted me and thanked me for my service. They put those words in her mouth. It was the only decent thing to do.”

“Stooping to vandalism. She’d be so proud.” Garrus raised his glass. “To Nathaly Shepard.”

“Nathaly.” They clinked glasses, and settled in to order food.

Much later, Garrus finally gave in and said goodnight, weaving only a little as he made his exit. Alenko had kept better moderation, and decided to get one last round before turning in himself.

He squeezed into an open space at the bar, and waited his turn. The woman at his left shifted towards him. “Buy you a drink?”

She was about his age and absolutely stunning by any standard. Bright blue eyes smiled at him, framed by long dark hair. Her cocktail dress managed to uphold good taste while making ample use of her excellent figure.

“No thanks,” he said, turning back to the bar.
“I wouldn’t be so quick to turn me down.” She was still smiling, with a hint of condescension. The Aussie accent did nothing to make her less attractive. “I have a business proposition.”

His face got even redder. “I’m not that sort-“

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” She drew him away from the bar, away from the immediate proximity of other listeners. “Ten minutes. That’s all I ask.”

This didn’t feel right, but curiosity was always his downfall. He let her lead him to a quiet corner table, and watched her pull a small datapad out of her clutch.

“You’ve got your ten minutes,” he said.

She smoothed her hands against the table. “Commander Alenko, my name is Miranda Lawson. I’m here to tell you about Project Lazarus.”

He stared at her open-mouthed for almost a full minute. Her mouth quirked. “No need to be so shocked-“

Her interrupted her. “I don’t need to tell you how badly it would go if anyone saw us here. So say your piece and hope it convinces me not to call C-Sec down on you.”

“We’ll skip the preliminaries. Fine.” She folded her hands again. “I want you to persuade your colleagues in the Alliance to stop investigating our program.”

“And why in hell would I want to do that?”

“I have some information regarding your former C.O. which might interest you.”

That caught him off-guard once again. He couldn’t seem to find his balance in this conversation. “The ship went down ages ago. What new information could possibly exist?”

But his mind was already narrowing the possibilities. The first, of course, was that the strange ship which attacked the *Normandy* over Alchera was a Cerberus vessel, but the notion was dismissed just as quickly. There was no chance they had the funding to build something so large or advanced, not when they made their way by stealing every bit of interesting research they ran across and testing it against the bounds of ethics and decency. Certainly not in ’83, before their funding hit an exponential growth curve.

Several other ideas grew and faltered, until he hit on one that seemed depressingly likely.

He shot her a glare, suddenly angry. “If you’re holding her body, I strongly suggest you return it to her parents. I have a long memory for that kind of indecency.”

“Close, but not quite.” She withdrew a small datapad from her clutch, cued up a photograph and slid it over the table. “It’s not her body. It’s her.”

Farrell’s parting words- *we can bring her back*- crossed his mind. They seemed every bit as ridiculous and unnerving now as they did then. Besides, Farrell was safely in SAMI custody.

He studied Lawson another long moment, measuring, before picking up the datapad and glancing at the display. His hand went to his mouth. He stared.

“I apologize for the graphic nature of the image. It’s taken us this long to make her look that good. Your commander was an utter mess when she came into my care.”
Shepard lay on a table, a hundred tubes running out her limbs like worms burrowed into the flesh. Her hair was gone. Raw, livid scars crawled across her skin, some of them freshly stitched with rude black sutures. Her blue eyes stared comatose into the camera, with none of the liveliness he remembered. It cut him to see the difference.

And a monitor in the background displayed a healthy, beating heart.

“What the hell is this?” he breathed, unable to look away. It was grotesque and compelling and raised too many questions to easily sort out.

“My organization, despite its differences with yours, has always held the advancement of the human race as our central mission.” She tapped the datapad. “With Shepard’s death, we lost our only spectre, and a woman not only equal to the most challenging of tasks, but with the even rarer ability to inspire and lead.”

She paused. “And with the reapers’ intentions now fully exposed by her work, we need every resource at our disposal available for the coming war.”

His eyes jerked back to her. “You believe the reapers exist.”

“As do you.” She shrugged. “My boss has been fighting them longer than anyone, even Shepard. Though until she heard the beacon’s message and defeated Sovereign, it wasn’t clear what exactly was being fought, or the stakes of the battle. It’s only recently that he’s made some of that history available to select operatives.”

“Or so he says.”

“I trust him. There’s nothing I could say to convince you, I know.” She leaned forward. “Except maybe this. Colonies are already vanishing. This could be the next battlefront for our survival.”

“Or that could be your work,” he shot back. Nothing he’d seen in the past year had disproven it.

“Believe what you like.”

Alenko looked back at the picture. It was easier a second time. He took a breath. “What is this?”

“We located her… remains. It was not an easy task.” She grimaced faintly, as if burying an unpleasant memory. “After that, it was down to pushing the limits of modern medicine. We’ve enjoyed a good deal of success, though as you can see, there’s still a long road ahead.”

“For the sake of argument, let’s say I believe this is real.” In truth, he wanted to have doubts, because doubt was rational, doubt was expected. Doubt was safe. But he believed it like he believed in gravity, in breathing. Cerberus had Nathaly. Alive.

He set the datapad down, and looked at Lawson directly. “Why exactly are you bringing this to me?”

She blinked twice. “I had the impression that you were romantically involved. Were my sources mistaken?”

All he had to do to recall the taste of her mouth was close his eyes. Another tiny effort of will, and he could feel her hair knotted around his fingers, a small tension she liked- something to pull against when she pushed him down.

He worked to keep his voice steady. “Your organization doesn’t go in for goodwill gestures, Ms.
Lawson.”

“You’ve been looking for Project Lazarus.” She pointed at the datapad. “This is Project Lazarus. We’re bringing your girlfriend back to life.”

Somehow that was the last thing he expected. He was flabbergasted. “But you’ve spent three billion credits—”

“Closer to four.” She winced faintly. “And counting. I’d like to invite you to come see for yourself. Ask your questions, look at whatever you like. See whether or not you agree it’s best to let us continue without Alliance interference.”

“Ms. Lawson, I—”

“Miranda, please.” She smiled, this time beguiling, but he was only repulsed. “Frankly we could also use your help, if you’re willing to give it.”

Alenko was completely off-balance. He was still reeling from the suggestion that Nathaly might actually be alive— and Lawson kept hitting him with new and equally complicated topics. “Help? With what?”

“Shepard.” She sounded exasperated, as if it was all terribly obvious and she had to lead the slow student by the hand. “You know her as well as anyone. The pictures might not look like it, but she’s closer to waking than you realize. It goes without saying that years spent in a coma can create psychological distress.”

“Not nearly as much as waking up in the custody of people who did to her what you did on Akuze, and all the rest of it back in ’83. And those are just the ones she knew about.” Heavy with the implication of how much more he’d learned since then.

Miranda straightened and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Akuze was a long time ago.”

“She lived with it every day.”

“If that’s what you believe, do you want her to wake up there alone?”

He pressed his lips together, took in the awful image a third time, and squared his shoulders. “You have an agenda here. What are you doing to her?”

“Other than saving her life? Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you,” Alenko said flatly. Nobody had to tell him Nathaly was special, or that saving her was worth any financial expenditure. But most people, Cerberus included, would expect a hefty return on that investment.

“I don’t expect blind faith.” She reached over and flicked to a new screen, one showing a travel itinerary for five days hence. “We’ve booked you flights out to the edge of the Traverse. From there, our people will transport you.”

“And let you trap me out in the Terminus somewhere? I don’t think so.” Alenko was getting angry. “Farrell tried this recruitment crap with me already. I’m not buying.”

“I’m not giving you the coordinates of the facility, but tell anyone you like. Call anyone you like. Surely you have some mutual friends with a vested interest in the outcome, ones who wouldn’t let you vanish.” Lawson rose from her seat. “There’s no obligation. If you want more information, be
on that flight. If you like what you see, we can negotiate from there.”

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t take this datapad to my superiors as soon as you leave.”

She arched a single eyebrow. “Because on the off chance that I’m not full of bullshit, you want us to succeed as badly as we do. You want her back. Like it or not, your Alliance would simply shut us down. They’d probably send you to do it.” Lawson nodded. “A pleasure meeting you, Commander. I hope we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

Alenko lingered in the bar for the better part of an hour, stone cold sober, beyond last call, until an annoyed waiter shooed him out. The datapad contained additional information—a timeline with medical milestones, a selection of recent biometrics, several additional images. MRIs showing neurological activity.

He thought about all the way home. The possibility that she was alive was almost too much to process, after living with a grief so deep and persistent it seemed a part of him now, like his limbs or his voice.

At the same time, it was too tantalizing to ignore. God alone knew how Cerberus discovered their relationship. And Lawson’s approach was textbook emotional manipulation, exploiting his love for her. He’d be crazy to go.

But on the other hand, this brand of mad science, literally raising the dead, was exactly the sort of thing Cerberus would try. It was exciting, unprecedented, dangerous, and amoral. If that was Nathaly, what Lawson called medical care others might deem torture. It didn’t look like so much as a centimeter of her body escaped the attentions of a surgeon’s knife.

And Nathaly was always very clear that this was the absolute last way she wanted to go—helpless on a table, at the whims of doctors, long past the point of natural death. There was no telling how much of that would stay with her after she awoke. If she awoke. She’d need someone she could trust, someone who loved her.

Alenko couldn’t recall much of the first few months after Alchera anymore. One day followed the next, plodding, inevitable, full of fog, like the world ended and nobody bothered to notice. His brain had erased those memories in self-defense.

But since returning to active duty, he’d witnessed the perversion of Cerberus first-hand, seeing how they destroyed families and spread like a cancer wherever they took root. Fighting them reminded him why he signed up. That Cerberus was the closest thing Nathaly had to a mortal enemy helped. By even considering Lawson’s offer, he betrayed all of that.

But by not considering it, he might betray Nathaly herself.

He glanced at the clock, decided he could care less about the late hour, and began to make some calls.

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Alenko was shocked by the size of the station beyond the shuttle ports as they made their final approach.

It must have shown on his face, because the soldier escorting him chuckled. He introduced himself as Jacob Taylor, head of station security. Now he folded his arms and sat back on his heel. “A little more than you expected?”
“You could say that.” Alenko drifted closer to the port, curious despite himself. “You could have a staff of a hundred here, easy.”

“A hundred and seven,” he said with pride. “Plus the mechs and the other automated equipment. Nothing but the best.”

“I suppose you can afford the best when you’re buying it with other people’s money.”

“We’re mostly funded by donations.”

“Donations don’t get you the billions of credits you need to run an op like this.” His tone left no room for uncertainty. He’d seen Alliance estimates of the cash funneling through Lazarus Cell. Until now, none of them knew how all that money was put to use. He supposed raising the dead came at considerable expense.

Jacob sidestepped it altogether. “I’m not a finance guy. Here, we’re either security or science. The Terminus has its share of pirates and warlords who’d love to get their hands on this kind of facility.”

The shuttle entered the docking bay and set down smoothly, with barely a bump. Miranda Lawson was waiting as the hatch slid open. Instead of a cocktail dress, she wore a white-and-black cat suit emblazoned with an orange Cerberus emblem on the left breast. “Welcome, Commander Alenko. I’m glad to see you reconsidered.”

“It took some doing to get leave on such short notice, and I had to lie to my C.O., but I’m here,” he said shortly. “This better not be a waste of time.”

“Of course.” She put a hand on her hip and glanced around with an air of expectation. “It’s been a long trip. Would you prefer to settle in first, or shall we get right to it?”

“I want the proof you promised me.”

“Very well.” She turned and started walking, her heels clicking against the tiled floor. “I anticipated that might be your response, and so we’ve made appropriate preparations.”

The station was an oval pillar, at least twelve decks, but comparatively narrow. The hallway led to a central elevator column, and all four walls of the carriage were transparent. As they rose, Alenko saw flashes of laboratories outfitted with all manner of equipment, as well as crew quarters and a security station. The staff didn’t glance up from their work as the elevator slid by.

Lawson seemed content to ride in silence, and Alenko didn’t have anything to say. It had been a long trip, debating the wisdom of accepting the invitation, and now that it was so close to an end, his stomach was tied in knots. He was about to confront either the most disappointing or most extraordinary moment of his life.

The elevator chimed softly. Every window on this hall was darkened. Lawson glanced over her shoulder. “Follow me.”

The floor seemed deserted, an empty expanse of white walls and gray floors washed in the harsh light of LEDs. The echo of their footsteps and the occasional hiss of the station ventilation were the only sounds. Eventually, she paused before a door and input thumbprint and a numeric code. The hatch slid open on oiled tracks.

Inside, the room was small, with fresh stacks of surgical gowns stowed neatly in their hypoallergenic wrappers, and a deep sink stood beside a full-body airlock. Lawson handed him
various pieces of kit. “I’m afraid at this stage, the patient’s surgeries are still continuous. We must maintain a strict clean room environment for the sake of her health.”

Methodically, his mind somewhere else, he washed up and pulled on the necessary clothing. The mask was last. He slipped it over his ears. Lawson gestured towards the airlock. “I won’t intrude on such a delicate moment, but I do ask that you not touch anything. Our equipment is sensitive. The intercom system can convey any requests or questions you might have.”

He nodded, his throat too tight with anxiety to speak, and stepped forward. The door closed behind him. A rush of cold air brushed his face as the cleaning system removed any lingering trace of the world beyond this room from his body, the tube flashed with sterilizing light, and then the inner hatch slid aside.

Nothing inhabited the room but blinking machines and the woman prone on the table.

She’d been moved since the photography session. Now her face tilted towards the ceiling, and her eyes were shut. Her arms lay limp beside her, a gingerbread woman, lifeless and unnatural save for the steady rise and fall of her chest. Judging by the oxygen line secured beneath her nose, her breathing was independent, much to his surprise. He guessed the tube crawling out of her mouth was for some other purpose- instrumentation access, perhaps. Or feeding. He couldn’t repress a shudder at the thought of food being trickled down her throat like that.

Alenko spent the first several minutes lingering on the clinical details, calming himself. It was somehow both more awful and less gruesome than the photos conveyed. But after a while he could no longer avoid confrontation with the only question that mattered. He approached the table.

In the pictures, she wore a hospital gown to cover her modesty. Now, he was faintly disgusted to see a thin sheet serving the same purpose, as if it was too much trouble to move the gown every time they needed to perform a procedure. Whatever she was, she was owed more dignity than that.

He didn’t know what he expected. He wasn’t a doctor, or a scientist; how could he begin to verify the woman before him was actually Nathaly, and not a clone, or a composite, or some kind of fancy organic VI? Farrell’s words rang in his head all throughout transit, but the threat that she could be a simulacrum had seemed distant at best.

He assumed he would just know, that her authenticity would be obvious once he was close enough to see and touch her. But of course that was ridiculous.

One thing was certain. New scars and other cosmetic damage aside, this woman was identical to Nathaly. Same height, same face, same proportions- he noted the electric stimulators attached at various points to her body, preventing muscular wasting. The soft fuzz carpeting her scalp was the same brilliant red. Good god, but she was going to be pissed when she realized they cut off her hair.

That non-sequitur of a thought broke the clinical spell. He hesitantly reached for her hand, and it was as warm and comfortable as he recalled. Once he did, he found he didn’t want to let go.

A stool wedged in between the medical equipment. He perched upon it, careful not to disturb the complex network of tubes and sensors, holding her hand and feeling both foolish and desperate. He wanted so badly for this to be real. But Alenko learned at a young age that wishes were useless.

He thought he’d have a million questions, pointed inquiries designed to either prove Lawson a liar or ferret out Cerberus’ agenda, but they could not withstand the power of this room and died
unvoiced. He lost track of how long he sat there, holding onto the one bit of her he could reach without interrupting her treatment and soaking up the sight of her.

When his heart grew too full to continue, he gently set her hand back on the sheet, reluctant to let go of that too-familiar feel, and cycled through the airlock.

Lawson, ever patient, waited in the prep room. She raised her eyes from her omni-tool as he cleared the hatch.

He moved the mask aside and took a breath. “Alright. Show me.”

“Let’s go back to my office.” She snapped the holograph shut. “It’s far more comfortable and I can access all of the data from there.”

Lawson’s suite occupied the entire uppermost floor of the station. The office area sat directly beneath the apex with a spectacular view of the cosmos above. It was decorated with the same severity as its occupant, in simple white and black with the occasional touch of Cerberus orange. They settled into comfortable chairs tucked into a corner across from the massive desk, and Lawson offered him a drink, which he declined.

She twisted the cap off a bottle of sparkling water and took a sip before jumping in. “I’m sure you have a lot of theories about how we’re deceiving you. Which would you like to address first?”

Alenko sat back in his chair, fully intending to ask a specific medical question. But instead his mouth said, “How did she die?”

Lawson blinked at him, caught off-guard. “Pardon?”

He cleared his throat, suddenly embarrassed without understanding why. “How did it happen?”

“Asphyxiation.” Her brow furrowed.

“She suffocated.” It was one of his nightmares. He found he couldn’t elaborate.

“Yes.” Lawson crossed her legs and folded her hands over her knee. “Judging from the pristine state of her CO2 scrubbers, we believe she experienced some manner of catastrophic suit failure, likely due to the explosion. She would have lost consciousness within minutes.”

Some breath he’d been holding for twenty long months went out of him at last. He sagged in on himself, covering his face with his hands.

“What is it?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“I just- On the ground, after the attack-“ He got up, ran his hand over his hair, overwhelmed and unable to properly explain. “From time to time, I- wondered, if… if there was anything I could have-“

He still couldn’t look at her. Her voice turned brisk, as if she were just as uncomfortable. “There was nothing to be done. Shepard was almost certainly dead before the Normandy’s escape shuttles hit the ground.”

She paused a delicate moment. Alenko attempted to compose himself. Then she smoothed her voice back into its usual pleasant tone. “But I’m sure you have other questions.”

He took a deep breath. Then another, then returned to his seat. When he spoke, it was almost
normal. “The most obvious. How do I know that’s not a clone?”

“I hoped that would be the one.” Lawson smiled. “It’s easily disproved.”

She flipped open a terminal set on the table between them. “First, of course, is that clones are
grown in large tubes or vats, where they can be surrounded by a nutrient bath. There’s no need to
subject them to progressive surgeries.”

“That could be staged,” he said neutrally. There was no need to comment on the horror of carving
up a living being just to put on a show. After Nepheron and Trident, he had no difficulty believing
Cerberus would do exactly that to underpin a lie.

“More compelling are the telomere data.” She swung the screen around to face him. “Telomeres
are attachments protecting the ends of chromosomes during cell replication, that gradually shorten
over an individual’s lifespan.”

Half-remembered lessons from high school science trickled back. Biology was never his strong
suit. He was more drawn to computers. “A clone’s telomeres are longer?”

“Correct. A clone hasn’t undergone nearly the same amount of cell replication and replacement as
an actual thirty-one-year-old human.” Lawson pointed at the screen. “Here you have samples
from Shepard herself. And here are samples taken from cloned organ tissue we grew to repair her
body. As you can see, the cloned telomeres are substantially longer.”

“She won’t be thirty-one until April,” he corrected, vacantly, staring at the screen. The cynic in
him warned that he lacked the expertise to evaluate any of this data. But Alenko was also forced to
admit that if it was a fabrication, it was damned elaborate. “How did you find her body?”

“It’s a long story. But to summarize, we got a tip that her remains were recovered by the Shadow
Broker, on the behalf of an alien race we know as the Collectors, apparent payment for a favor
owed. We also learned the body might still be viable. I was dispatched with instructions to
recover her by any means necessary.”

The galaxy contained at least a dozen sentient, space-faring species. Even schoolchildren could
name them all, if pressed. “I’ve never heard of Collectors.”

“They’re rare. They keep to the Terminus- and themselves. And they’re known for their keen
interest in genetic experimentation.”

His stomach tightened. “So when they went after Nathaly…”

“That couldn’t be allowed to happen. I was dispatched with instructions to recover her by any
means necessary.” She paused. “I succeeded.”

“I can’t help but feel that you’re glossing over the details.”

“I am.” Lawson sighed and shook her head. “I don’t expect trust, not right away. But this project
is the primary focus of my life, and that’s not likely to change in the near future. I’m deeply
invested in seeing it through. You’re here because I convinced my boss you could be irreplaceably
useful. I’m not your enemy.”

“Cerberus is known to do a little experimenting of their own.”

A muscle in her jaw twitched- irritation. “Our instructions are very clear. We need Shepard as
herself, not as a construct or a puppet or whatever you’re fearing.”
The lack of real information layered on top of the hard sell irritated him. “Who is your boss? Do you report directly to the Illusive Man, or are there intermediaries?”

“All in good time.” Again, that smile, that set his teeth on edge. “Let’s hear your next theory. I’m eager to exhaust every doubt.”

The conversation continued for several hours, until his head began to spin and Lawson suggested they break for the night. He was escorted to a private room. Though small, it offered every amenity. Someone went to great lengths to impress him favorably, right down to his preferred brand of soap. The VIP treatment rankled. Alenko recognized it for the bribe it was.

He checked his throwaway email before going to sleep, and was faintly surprised to find it uncensored by Cerberus system protocols. Garrus was his chosen point of contact, and he sent a brief, nonspecific message indicating he arrived but didn’t have anything to report yet. If anything, Garrus responded with even more skepticism than Alenko when he explained this trip. Alenko was grateful for that policeman’s doubt, an anchor back to reality if his hope ran away with him.

The next few days passed in a similar fashion. With and without Lawson, Alenko poured over the project records and grilled the scientists. They always had an answer. It was either true or the biggest fraud he’d ever seen, and at some point, he realized that the probing was useless. There was nothing they could say or demonstrate that would evaporate that last drop of suspicion. And in truth, he was also fighting himself—his instinct, his need, to believe this all was real.

He visited Nathaly. Her lead physician, a man named Wilson, methodically explained her current status, though with a constant edge of disdain. It was obvious that the doctor found such tourism a waste of his time and talent. Nonetheless, Alenko took meticulous mental notes. More than once, he caught himself asking how a particular procedure would affect her once she was out of the coma, as if it was a certainty rather than a question mark. The medical team’s confidence was infectious.

At long last, when he could think of nothing further, he abandoned the medical inquisition, and found himself back in Lawson’s office with an entirely different line of questioning.

She was amused. “I admit I began to think we’d never assuage your curiosity.”

“I’m satisfied for now.” He sat back and crossed his arms. “But I still don’t know why you went to all this effort. You don’t have to convince me she’s extraordinary, but she’s still only one person.”

“I thought we went over this. Shepard is iconic. Cerberus is… unpopular. It limits our ability to serve humanity in particular spheres. The Illusive Man believes Shepard is essential to solving the reaper dilemma, and he puts his money where his mouth is.”

“But you still haven’t told me what it is you want Nathaly to do.” Alenko’s frustration showed.

“What she does best. Our goals are aligned. She’s served humanity her entire life. We can give her resources, ones even the Alliance can’t match, and a freer rein than she ever enjoyed under military command.”

“She’ll never work for Cerberus,” he said flatly. “Much less be your ambassador to humanity.”

“I think Shepard always does what’s necessary to complete her mission. Do you disagree?” Lawson raised an eyebrow.

Alenko looked away. They both knew damn well that neither the Council nor the Alliance had
made the kind of major push required to fortify against a probable reaper invasion. Quite the opposite— they’d silenced any mention of the reapers in public discourse.

Lawson continued. “I’ve no doubt she would refuse to compromise her principles, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be useful to one another.” She put a finger to her lips. “I could say the same of you.”

“Me?” He was startled. He’d almost forgotten Farrell’s crude attempts to gain his loyalty. Lawson had a more subtle touch.

“We’ve had our eye on you a long time. You’re a talented man— intelligent, dedicated, capable. And of course you’re a biotic.”

That rang sour. “I’ve seen exactly what you do to biotics. No thanks.”

“I’m a biotic myself. Do I look as if I’ve come to any harm?” She shook her head, regretful. “It’s true some of our labs have gotten… carried away, from time to time. I assure you the Illusive Man has no patience for such activities, once discovered. You would be a valuable asset, not a guinea pig.”

“I’m an Alliance marine.”

“There’s a mistaken assumption that we hate the Alliance. Many of our best operatives, including Jacob and others you’ve met during your stay, are ex-Alliance. We simply believe an Alliance bound by regulation and diplomacy cannot fully execute its duty to our species.”

At first he was furious, rising from his chair. She watched him impassively. Then, abruptly, the other shoe dropped and he felt simply ill. “This is it. This is the real reason you brought me here. None of it was about helping Nathaly— she’s bait.”

“It is about helping Shepard,” Lawson insisted. “If I didn’t think you would be useful in that regard, I would never have gone to all this trouble, not for such a recalcitrant potential recruit. But it’s not as if it would occupy all your time. She won’t even be fully awake until at least October by our current projections.”

“I do your dirty work, abandon my sworn duty, and in exchange you let me monitor her care.” He didn’t know whether to laugh in her face or punch it. “I took an oath to defend the Alliance.”

She waved a hand, dismissive. “Oaths are broken all the time. What matters is principle. What matters is the mission. Do you honestly believe that the Alliance is secretly preparing for the reapers? Is there anything else in the galaxy that matters right now beside that?”

And the dreadful thing about it was Lawson looked entirely earnest, and entirely sane. Nothing like Farrell back aboard the Agincourt. Like someone making sense.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.” He ran a hand over his hair. “This must be what it feels like to go mad.”

“It’s true that sometimes a cell gets out of hand. It’s a price we pay for an organizational structure that allows us to be effective, efficient, and invisible. Much as the Alliance pays for its bureaucracy and lofty morals with a sluggish response. They’re not representative of the whole of our organization.”

“No.” He shook his head. “We’re not discussing this.”
She sat back and crossed her legs, her arms resting easily on the chair. “Can you tell me the Alliance has no atrocities or mistakes in its past? You were a victim yourself, as a child. You know I’m right. Should the Alliance be judged by its worst mistakes?”

“The difference is accountability. The Alliance is accountable to the public, and to our elected officials.” He jabbed a finger at her. “Cerberus is accountable to one man with an excess of money and ambition.”

“I’d consider our offer carefully.” Lawson’s calm gaze never wavered. “One cannot serve two masters. You’re in, or you’re out. No exceptions.”

He scoffed. “You’d let me just walk away?”

“We’re not bogeymen. The project would go forward without your involvement.” The words hung in the air with hefty finality. They meant that if he left, he threw away his only chance to see Nathaly again - touch her, hear her. Hold her. His arms ached at the mere thought of it.

For long months of denial, he wished for exactly this, an unlikely miracle or stroke of fate that would return her to him. He’d lose entire days imagining it. Not once had he pictured the hand that offered that dream belonging to Cerberus.

Wild ideas crossed his mind. At this point, he was familiar with the station’s layout. He imagined escaping with her, blasting a way through the defenses and stealing a shuttle, though he knew there was no chance Nathaly would survive the experience.

Or telling Lawson to shove her offer, informing the Alliance what he learned, and returning here with a small armada - but he had no idea where the station was, and could not begin to guess.

Or even pretending to join up, and pulling off a double-blind, just until he could find a way to get Nathaly out. That seemed the worst idea of all. Even if he could convince Lawson, who was too cunning for anyone’s good, his superiors would never agree to the plan. Nathaly just wasn’t that valuable to the Alliance.

As if echoing his thoughts, Lawson said, “We brought her back after your Alliance declared her dead. They didn’t even search for her body. Their relationship with the Terminus Systems and the Council was more important than recovering her remains and bringing peace to her survivors.”

For some reason, just then he thought of lying with Nathaly in dark, en route to Ilos, aware that fraternization was nothing compared to mutiny but feeling that small discomfort all the same. Knowing it was deeper than that, too, that despite all declarations that nothing could change, everything had changed, from the role their feelings played in Ash’s death to the way they held each other through that night, afraid of death for the first time in many years because suddenly there was all the world to lose. He loved her so deeply and completely just then, more than he ever believed he was capable of feeling.

But they survived Ilos, and the Battle of the Citadel. When he saw her climb out from under half the Presidium Tower, in a way the fear died, because what was left to survive? The mission was over. They were victorious. That same complacency allowed the final assault at Alchera to sneak up on him and tear out his heart while he wasn’t looking. If he closed his eyes he could still feel it, all ragged arteries and beating bloody beneath his skin.

He swore he wouldn’t leave the ship without her and then less than a minute later did exactly that, because he trusted she could survive anything. No surprise attack from a mystery ship would kill Commander Shepard. The very idea sounded like the beginning of a punchline, like something
Joker would tell when the haul between systems got especially long. “Did you hear the one about the time Shepard’s ship blew up? She grabbed onto a wing and rode it like a heat shield all the way down and said it was just like surfing a wave.”

He left because she ordered him to, and Alenko followed orders. What would she tell him to do now? What would she want him to do?

Alenko licked his lips and glanced back at the quiet woman waiting in the chair. “Can I see her?”

Though disappointed by the loss of momentum, Lawson concealed it gracefully. “Of course.”

They arrived at the prep room. He pulled on the paper protectors, the gloves and the mask. The air lock performed its function. Alenko sat by Nathaly and took her hand, as he’d done so many times these last few days, so often that he’d started to take it for granted again.

His fluttering heart contracted like a stone, hard and heavy and dense, a foreign mass in his chest. He felt old as time and twice as tired.

Her face stared blankly into the lights. There was not a trace of conscious thought upon it, not so much as a hint of a dream. Only the monitors attached to her head told him any part of her brain was alive. Cybernetics threaded her body, like twine holding her together. How much of that activity was them? How much was her? How could he ever really know?

That last day on the Normandy was etched in his brain. He’d forget his own name before he forgot that last conversation. Or Nathaly’s expression behind the transparent mask of her breather helmet, lit by the fires in the ship’s battery and her own inner fierceness, fury that anyone dared attack her ship and hurt her people matched by an ironclad determination to ensure everyone made it to the escape shuttles. Her eyes were so intensely expressive even when her face went blank, that gaze that could pin a rampaging krogan to the wall.

He loved that about her. He missed it desperately now. Alenko fumbled at her hand, lacing their fingers.

“I miss you,” he said. The woman on the table gave no response. His voice broke. He buried his face in his free hand while the other lay tangled with hers.

There were other memories, too. The disgust as they stalked through what remained of the laboratories of Nepheron, uncovering one horror after another, cataloguing its contents for the inbound Alliance patrol. Kahoku’s corpse, tossed aside like garbage. Holding her shaking body after they got back to the ship. The signs written across the galaxy indicating Cerberus was not only following Saren’s research, but replicating it.

Jenkins. Ash—god, Ashley, who hadn’t deserved to get caught between them like she did, even if it wasn’t completely their fault. Saldana, who lost his mind aboard a ship hijacked by a geth device. The ones who died in the fire as the Normandy came apart. The people he lost on the ground at Alchera, Addison Chase and the Dravins and the rest of them, shadows just waiting for some small reminder to drag them out.

Pain colored so much of what they had together—too much. They stood together through it all. Pulled each other through it, sometimes. But there was good, too. He’d give ten years of his life for five more minutes in that bar on Abael.

It seemed like yesterday and an entire age ago, all at once. They carried it in the marks on their faces and the way they touched each other, each contact carrying its own weight and all the others
behind it, until a mountain of shared moments made up this incredible thing to which they gave the clinical title “relationship” because no word could ever truly fit.

Would she even be herself, at the end of all of this? Was Nathaly still here, somewhere in this ruined shell, or would the final result just be a cyborg construct from one of Farrell’s nightmares? A Nathaly golem, wearing her face and using her voice, just like that damn ad kiosk. How much of her would be Cerberus?

Nathaly always knew there were things at stake more important than survival. She lived that before on Akuze, and again on Virmire when she came after him, and that day she threw away her life to get Joker out. Her choice, the last one she ever got to make. Alenko had been furious with Joker for months, until he realized it was only because he couldn’t bring himself to be angry at her, for being so selfishly selfless that she got herself killed.

He left her on the ship. It haunted him. How could he have done that? Why hadn’t he followed her to the bridge? Because she ordered him to leave? Was that absolution, or just an excuse?

She had no voice now to tell him to do anything. But her memory was in his head now, saying go, no matter how much he wanted to stay. Even if it meant she woke up as some kind of Cerberus puppet. Even if it meant she never woke up at all.

I’m not leaving, he thought, an echo of that day, just as reactionary and as futile. I can’t walk away again.

It was the wrong answer. Even comatose, he could feel the weight of her judgment and her revulsion. She wouldn’t want to be saved, not if the cost was helping Cerberus. Not if it meant betraying every value they shared, the duty they swore, and the people they served- the ones who needed his protection more than her.

It would have been funny if his heart weren’t breaking. She was always the one teasing him about being too duty-bound and loyal to a fault, insisting he needed to learn how to relax.

Alenko raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them through the paper. Then he stood and lowered the mask, just for a second, and kissed her forehead. She even smelled the same. He watched her for a long, final moment, and left without looking back, because it would have been unbearable.

In the prep room, as he tore off the protective coverings and tossed them into the incineration bin, Lawson could not contain her impatience. “Have you made a decision? We haven’t even started to discuss salary arrangements-“

“Take me home,” he interrupted.

Her mouth snapped shut. It seemed, at long last, he managed to catch her off guard. “You’re certain?”

“Yes.” He didn’t elaborate. He couldn’t endure speaking, even if she deserved that particular lecture.

“Well. We’re good as our word.” She frowned. “I’m sorry we won’t be working together.”

He threw away the last rubber glove, and wiped his hands on his pants as though they were dirty. This place felt foul despite its scrupulously clean interior. It was a cloud pressing down around him and he suddenly couldn’t wait to leave. “I’m not.”

She hesitated- unusual for her. “I hope at least you’ll take to heart what we’re trying to
accomplish. It would be extremely detrimental to Shepard’s health if the Alliance discovered our work.”

Alenko rounded on her so fast she took a step backwards. But he had no intention of striking her. “You can’t just play with people. I hope you do wake her up. I hope you get to hear exactly what she has to say about what you’ve been doing with her.”

Lawson’s expression hardened. “Someone will be along to see you out.”

The shuttle departed within the hour. He rode in silence, staring out the port into the void. He didn’t trust himself to speak. He didn’t trust himself to think. His body felt hollow as a drum.

Taylor grew uncomfortable with the quiet about thirty minutes in and took a stab at conversation. “I have to say I’m surprised. I don’t think I could have done it—walked away like that. The Alliance is lucky to have your loyalty.”

It was the closest Alenko had ever come to cold-blooded murder. “Go to hell.”

Jacob declined to say anything further for the remainder of the flight.

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Some weeks later, back aboard the Citadel, Garrus listened to his account with increasing incredulity. It had taken this long for Alenko to simply be able to talk about what happened, and Garrus had a whole barrage of questions.

When he finally wrapped up his story, Garrus sat back on the couch and shook his head. Then he got up and went into the kitchen. “Do you have a drink?”

Alenko hauled out the bottle of dextro-amino rye he kept for just such visits, and poured out three fingers. Then he retrieved his own bottle and didn’t bother to pour that at all, but took a long pull directly from its mouth.

Garrus drained his in one go. Alenko silently passed him the rye. He filled it again. “By the spirits, Kaidan.”

“I know.” He took another drink. He’d spent the first days back completely numb.

“Anderson can go straight to hell. He should have retrieved her body. He was right there.”

“Agreed.” Not that there was any point in ranting about it now. Not that Alenko hadn’t gotten halfway to the councilor’s office before finally talking himself out of confronting him.

“What they were doing with her—Cerberus— you really believe—“

Alenko grew tired of this conversation. They’d already been through it three times. “The techs told me over and over, their mandate was to put her back exactly the way she was before. I have no idea if it’s true. Or how true.”

“The person Shepard was before hated Cerberus. That can’t possibly fit with their plans.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Alenko massaged his forehead. “They even fixed the damn anosmia. She’ll be happy she can eat cinnamon again.”

“What?” Garrus was momentarily derailed.
“Cinnamon. She said it didn’t taste the same without the smell.”

The other shoe dropped. “The head injury after the Battle of the Citadel.”

“Yeah.” Shepard had been nursing a concussion since Noveria. Their Mako landing roof-first on the Presidium walk had not improved matters.

Garrus paused, frustrated. “And you have no idea where this Lazarus Station is?”

“None. I tried to work it out when I got home, but I don’t have enough information. It’s in the Terminus, two relays and a few days from a little mining outpost in the Traverse. That’s the best I can do.”

“That could be anywhere.”

“I know,” he said again, with a bit more of an edge. “Damn it, don’t you think I’ve thought about this? I’ve done nothing but think about this.”

“So that’s it, then. We just leave Shepard in Cerberus’ hands, and hope they’re kinder to her than all their other experiments.”

His temper had slowly eroded, over the course of this conversation and the last several weeks. He was as angry with himself as with Garrus. “What the hell was I supposed to do? Tell me, and I’ll contact Lawson right now.”

“You have her contact?” Garrus was surprised.

“I could figure it out.” He’d thought of that too, delving recklessly through the Cerberus files in the pit, finding a way to reach Lawson and beg her to take him back to Lazarus Station, let him hold Nathaly’s hand just one more time. He dreamed about it. Sometimes he woke in a cold sweat, for a moment convinced he’d actually followed through.

Garrus ran his hand over his face. “I don’t know what you could have done. These bastards know how to torture a person.”

They sat in silent acknowledgement of that truth, Garrus tracing a seam in the countertop, Alenko staring out into the middle distance. Garrus eventually spoke. “What are you going to do about work? You’ve been after Lazarus for a year.”

He just shook his head. “I haven’t got a clue in hell. I can’t tell them about the trip. And whatever we find in the future… I don’t know.”

In truth, it didn’t seem his biggest concern. He could just see the bookshelf through the kitchen entrance. Dark wood with square cubbyholes, not the sort of thing he’d pick out himself. Not that Alex had cared- he just crossed his arms, looking extremely Scandinavian, and said it’s functional.

Which indeed it was. Anything would fit on that shelf. And as if to prove it, Mat, Alex, and Garrus populated it with a scattering of his few personal possessions before he got back from visiting his parents. Including the Alliance burial flag they found in the coat closet, stuck in a frame, and displayed on top. They hadn’t known what it was. Alenko didn’t go out of his way to tell people. It was too hard to explain, meeting Nathaly’s mother almost by chance at the funeral, and having her offer it to him on the basis of whatever scant information Nathaly had provided about their relationship. He still didn’t feel it exactly belonged with him. But he hadn’t tried to give it back, and he hadn’t shut it away in a drawer.
There hadn’t even had a body. They just wanted a casket to make a good show, a state funeral, wring a little more mileage out of her before they laid her to rest. It seemed like such a petty point at the time, but that was before he watched Cerberus attempt to reanimate her.

Alenko stared at her flag for a long moment, at the picture from Abael sitting beside it, and then looked away and drank again. “She’ll hate me.”

Garrus looked up, briefly confused. “What?”

“I left her on the ship, and then I left her with them. She told me once this was the worst way to die.” He regarded the bottle dully. “Whenever she needs me most, I can’t find a way to help her.”

Garrus was quiet at first, considering his response carefully. “Shepard wouldn’t have wanted you to work for Cerberus. You knew it then and you know it now. Not for anything.”

“That’s not a no.” And that was without mentioning that he should find a way to tell the navy what he saw, and he knew that he wouldn’t, and it was eating him up inside. He couldn’t kill her again.

“It was a betrayal either way. No good choices there.”

He shook his head and stoppered the bottle before he could succumb to the temptation to drink it all down. “Nathaly wasn’t good at accepting a lack of options.”

“You’re getting worked up over something that hasn’t even happened yet. Shepard might never wake up. Worry about that first, and this later.”

He made no answer. Contemplating her hatred was bad enough. After all this, the thought that she might still be dead was a torture all its own. And the waiting was the worst of all.
July 2185

It began as a voice.

**Shepard-**

The second attack tore her from the escape hatch. She tumbled across the hall. A lance of yellow plasma as wide as her own body pierced the deck and blocked her path. Joker reached for her, his mouth opening-

**Shepard!**

She hit the launch key to send him on without her seconds before the ship exploded. Her spine slammed against the bulkhead. She came to three hundred meters from the wreckage to the sight of fading flames as the last of the *Normandy’s* O2 burned away. A hiss of air in her helmet- a hiss that shouldn’t be there.

Her throat filled with vacuum- she sucked at nothing, every cell screaming for oxygen, pain-filled and panicked. Her fingers clawed at the suit, but couldn’t find any rips to stopper. Her legs flailed in the microgravity-

**Shepard! We’re under attack-**

One by one her thoughts went dark. The pain faded. Death spread its soft shroud over her limp body.

But now something else was happening. There was light around her eyelids, noise in her ears. Cold. No time to get cold before her suit ran out of oxygen.

Her lungs expanded at the demand of her blood and filled with sterile, metal-tinged air. Shepard knew that taste. She’d lived on ships and stations since birth; re-circulated atmosphere tasted like machines, old oil and sour with a thousand thousand expelled breaths.

The pain of even that slight motion flayed her. Gasping and gagging, Shepard rolled to her side, head spinning. Splintered glass filled every joint and muscle. Her skull felt like rotten fruit, tight and swollen to bursting. There was a low, animal sound she didn’t recognize as her own voice.

That static in her ear again. Some woman yelling. **“Shepard, can you hear me? Get out of that bed, now! This facility is under attack!”**

The first shock faded; the pain was still there, but it was only pain, and Shepard was used to that, could push it away. Her vision cleared. She risked a look.

She lay in a hospital bed surrounded by medical equipment. The room itself was glowing with white light on white paint harsh enough to strain her eyes. An IV needle impaled the back of her hand. Judging from the size and depth of the bruise, it had been there quite some time. With a small groan, she tore the tape loose and pulled it out. The skin beneath the tape was a shade lighter than the surrounding flesh.

Her face felt strange, tight. She ran her fingertips over her cheeks.
“Your scars aren’t healed, but I need you to get moving. I can’t distract them much longer.” The woman on the comm was strained but collected. Urgent, not desperate. Almost but not quite military.

With another grunt of pain, Shepard swung her feet to the floor. Her head was curiously light on her neck but there was no time to think about it now. Sounds of gunfire and grenades were growing closer, occasionally punctuated by the odd scream or electronic screeching she associated with failing mechs. The geth didn’t squeal quite like that.

She was shockingly unsteady on her feet. Her first step sent her careening into the IV stand. She seized it and stumbled another pace forward, just barely managing to stay upright. A beige hospital gown flapped about her thighs. Though tied shut, it seemed made for somebody several sizes larger and a good bit shorter.

Her eyes did a quick scan of the room. One exit. An airlock- an airlock?- with two sealed plastic hatches. Shadows moving in the darkened room beyond. Scalpels firmly affixed to the robotic surgeons. A counter full of equipment, none of it useful, and cabinetry- her best bet to find a weapon.

The woman spoke again as if conjured by her thoughts. Apparently, she had some means of knowing whether Shepard was still in bed- cameras or biometric monitoring? “Good. There should be a pistol in the cabinet to your right. Hurry!”

Shepard dragged herself to the cabinet and took out the sidearm, not questioning why exactly a hospital would stow arms in a patient’s room. She didn’t recognize the model, which in other circumstances might have concerned her, but then she heard the sound of a hatch forced open. She turned in place.

A tin can of a mech stepped inside and opened fire.

At that point, more than a decade of combat experience cut across her foggy brain, and took control of Shepard’s body.

The mech’s first shot shattered a set of glass containers resting above the cabinet. Shepard was already ducking sideways, out of the line of fire. The second shot dented the cabinet that held the gun. She returned fire and caught the mech in the shoulder, and so its third shot went into the ceiling instead of her chest. Shepard planted her feet and sent her next bullet straight through its canister head.

A great puff of smoke emerged from its neck along with the sound of a muffled explosion, and the mech crumpled to the ground with a screech of white noise. Shepard’s ears rang in the abrupt silence. She began to notice this wasn’t a standard-issue patient room- an operating robot hung over her table, spider-like, and bizarre, faintly ominous monitors circled the bed. From the way her side was pulling, a rigid line up to her ribs she recognized as a suture, the equipment was recently used. It left her unsettled. The view was brand-new and completely familiar, all at once.

“Well done. Listen to me, Shepard- you need to get to the dock. We have to get you off this station.”

That was when she realized she hadn’t seen another human being since she woke up. The room was equipped for one. There had to be other casualties from the Normandy, the explosion was fresh in her mind. Where were they? She ordered Kaidan to get the escape shuttles launched, surely some of them made it clear-
Her stomach dropped. She woke up in this room by herself, and there was only one rational reason to explain why he wouldn’t be there with her. Especially if they were under attack and she was unconscious. Shepard pressed her finger to her ear to activate her comm, hardwired into her flesh since she enlisted, the motion automatic. Her voice a rusty croak, like dust had lodged in her vocal chords. “Where’s Kaidan?”

“I’ll explain everything once we’re out of here. Head straight through the airlock into the hallway and turn right.”

Because there was nothing else to do, and because she certainly wasn’t going to find anyone here, she complied.

The mechs had broken the airlock, the UV decontamination scanner flashing wildly back and forth along the tube. It emptied into a small anteroom lit only by emergency power, probably the same circuit as the hatch. Shepard paused, staring at the shelves of paper gowns and masks, the gigantic sink with its surgical scrub brush and nail file dispenser, the VI-controlled shower and the post-sized list of prep procedures tacked to the wall. It was way too much for a simple hospital room, and she didn’t want to look at it, or think about it, or do anything but forget she ever saw it.

Shepard stepped into a wide corridor floored in gray tile, unremarkably harsh and modern. Windows lined the walls. Behind them, all sorts of labs brimmed with darkened equipment, things her eyes shied from without knowing why. There was a handful of people, too- screaming, fleeing. The glass smothered their voices. One ran directly at Shepard, beating on the window with his hands as a heavy mech shot him to pieces. Blood coated the port and obscured her view.

“Take the stairs on your left,” the woman ordered. Shepard hurried forward.

The pain receded as she ran. She didn’t know if it was the adrenaline, or just getting used to moving again. She felt like she’d been lying down for days. Perhaps she had. The floor numbed her bare feet, her limbs curiously awkward. A few times, they nearly went out from under her as she skidded over tiles built for shoes. She was sweating more than she could explain from this minor exertion.

The mechs were out in force. They weren’t terribly coordinated, but impossible to avoid in the confines of the station. Shepard slid around another corner and dove behind a desk as a pack of four turned as one and began to fire.

Five shots later, two of them were down. The unfamiliar gun clicked as she pulled the trigger-overheated. She squatted behind the desk and turned it over in her hands. “There’s no cooling indicator on this pistol.”

The woman answered impatiently. “Right, I forgot- you’ll need to eject the heat sink and find a new thermal clip. The mechs should carry some.”

A bullet ricocheted off the top of the desk. Shepard ducked down further. “What in the hell-“

“Push the blue button on the side.”

Shepard found it and pushed it down. A squat cylinder, glowing red hot, popped out of the gun’s frame, falling away from her. She’d seen a prototype like this once- the vendor was laughed off the base. “You’re fricking kidding me.”

“Target acquired,” a mech said, closer than she liked.

She grit her teeth and scuttled sideways, weighing the gun in her hand. It should be enough.
Shepard listened to the mechs’ footsteps for the space of two breaths. Then she stood and lobbed the heavy pistol directly at the closest one. Before it even reached the target, she raced ahead.

The gun struck the mech squarely and knocked it off-guard. The second mech’s shot went wide. It hadn’t expected her to run towards them. She grabbed the first mech’s firing arm before it could recover, shot the second mech, and swept its legs out from under it. She followed it to the ground and crunched in its face with her knee. The flimsy aluminum and cheap plastic splintered beneath the blow. The mech went still.

She picked up its weapon- a clone of her useless pistol- and located several of the thermal clips her unnamed guardian had mentioned. The hospital gown had no pockets, so she carried them in her left hand. Her knee was spattered with her own blood where the mech’s face left shallow cuts.

The space station was a maze of hallways and elevators. The woman’s voice urged her onward, but Shepard couldn’t help stopping at every hatch, peering into every room, searching for some sign- any mention at all- of her crew. Most of the smaller spaces were storage closets or security posts. For a hospital, the station was strangely short of patient beds. The fifth doorway, however, led to an office.

The hatch split open and revealed two mechs already disabled and crawling towards the far wall. Someone else had been here, and recently. She shot them cleanly and paused to look around.

Several terminals were abandoned in-use by panicked staff, still showing the last files accessed. She picked one at random and skimmed the contents. Some kind of log. Shepard knew very well there was no time, but at that moment, her need for answers outweighed her need for survival. Nothing about this place added up. Her crew was nowhere to be found. She pressed play.

The image of an attractive woman, well-kept if no longer exactly young, spoke directly into the terminal’s camera. Dark hair fell over her shoulders. Her eyes were a startling shade of blue, and her voice matched the one on Shepard’s comm. “Log file thirteen dash oh-one-five. Damage to the test subject is far worse than we feared. In addition to the expected burns and internal injuries from the explosion, the subject has suffered significant cellular deterioration due to long-term exposure to vacuum and sub-zero temperatures. Despite the extent of the physical trauma, Wilson assures me subject is salvageable. The Lazarus Project will proceed as planned.”

The coldly clinical nature of the log, so suited to a station with more mechs than humans, made her skin crawl. Salvageable- as if this person was a bit of junkyard scrap. Research was clearly the primary function of this station, not hospital care. Perhaps there was nowhere closer to send injured personnel from the Normandy. It still didn’t sit well with her.

Shepard skipped ahead. “Log file one hundred ten dash oh-seven-three. Progress is slow, but subject shows signs of rudimentary neurological activity. In an effort to accelerate the process, we’ve moved from simple organic reconstruction to bio-synthetic fusion. Initial results show promise.”

She shut the terminal, far too queasy to hear any more. This wasn’t the time for tourist activity, anyway. Shepard hoped the poor bastard got out clean after all this started.

Her comm hissed and spat, the connection worsening. “Shepard, there are more mechs headed your way. I’ll meet you-“

An explosion on the other end almost deafened her. The radio cut out, drowned in garble. Shepard put her hand to her ear. “I didn’t get that. Repeat?”
More static was her only answer. She cursed. “Damn it.”

Checking her pistol and its ridiculous thermal clip, Shepard headed out into the depths of the station on her own.

She wandered up a flight of stairs and down a hallway, unsure if she should head towards the sounds of gunfire, or away. It didn’t seem likely the mechs were heading to the shuttles. That made no strategic sense. Then again, she had no notion of how large this station might be, how many decks it possessed, or the general layout. Towards the mechs could well be towards the shuttles depending on her relative location.

Frustrated, she paused at a terminal built into the corridor wall and tried to query the station VI. Shepard had lived in space most of her life. All stations had VIs. Yet, her inquiry hung in the air as though she was simply talking to herself. She was forced to resort to the keyboard. Her fingers were as stiff and clumsy as the rest of her, as if she’d forgotten the use of them. She swore under her breath through the typos as she searched fruitlessly for a map.

One of her bungled misspellings stumbled on another collection of log files, and began to autoplay before she could stop it. This voice belonged to a man- a whiny sort of drawl that made her neck itch. “The cost of this project is astronomical- over four billion credits so far.”

That gave her pause. Billion was one of those numbers so large it had its own gravity.

The unknown logger continued, “But nobody seems to care that we’ve gone over budget. I don’t know where the boss gets all his money… maybe it’s better not to know. I just wish he’d kick a little more in my direction once in awhile.”

She rubbed her neck, confused. Shepard had heard her fair share of complaints about Alliance appropriations but never insinuations of illicit funding. Misdirected, sure, but shady? She bit her lip, and wondered if perhaps the crew injuries were so numerous or severe that they’d been taken to a Terminus facility. Maybe it wasn’t even the Alliance who rescued them. That would explain the experimental nature of the work, the lack of protocol here.

That thought came with a fresh wave of worry. She still hadn’t seen any of her crew. She still hadn’t seen any sign of Kaidan. It took a large portion of her concentration to keep from speculating.

Shepard hit a button, hoping to start a new query on the status of the survivors, but it only queued up another record from that infernal log. “I can’t figure Miranda out. As project director, she should be ecstatic at all the progress we’ve made. But she’s still the same old ice queen. Maybe she’s worried Shepard might become the new favorite. Or maybe she’s just a pure, cold-hearted bitch.”

Her mouth went dry.

Shepard didn’t know how long she stood there, motionless at the keys, her jaw hanging open and her blood pooled at her feet. *That can’t be right,* she thought, but it was like hearing someone else inside her own mind. *I’ve only been here a few...* 

What? Days? Weeks? How could she even know?

The sound of mechs forcing open a hatch snapped her back to the present. She fired at them through the crack. They weren’t hard to take down, but they were relentless, and numerous. The station was overrun. She hadn’t seen another soul since the corridor just outside her room.
She shouldered her way through the hatch and continued on. She felt like she couldn’t breathe.

Shepard never wanted anything more than she wanted to be gone from this station, get somewhere she could clear her head. She must have misunderstood. What the logs implied couldn’t be… there must be some other explanation. What they said was impossible. The ship exploded. Somebody rescued her after she blacked out. Anything else was absolute insanity.

A set of stairs led her up several decks. This level was open-floored; more space for the staff to convene, less hallways and laboratories. Shepard passed through a mess hall and into an atrium.

A lone figure crouched by a balcony, pistol in hand. Across the gap stood a pair of mechs. They couldn’t seem to calculate a trajectory through the decorative frosted glass. Cheap tech, then. That explained the disorganization. Their bullets sailed over the top rail and missed the man completely. Shepard hurried over and squatted beside him.

His eyes went wide. He was darker than her, broader in the face, with close-cropped hair and a hint of a beard. “Shepard? What the hell-”

A bullet pinged off the rail. He flinched. “What are you doing here? Last I checked, you were a work in progress.”

At the moment, she wasn’t inclined to coddle his confusion. “Who the fuck are you? Why do you know my name?”

“Sorry, I forgot this is all new to you-“ He ducked down even lower as several additional mechs arrived. “Damn it. Things must be worse than I thought if Miranda’s got you running around.”

Miranda was the ice queen. Maybe the woman in her ear. Shepard shook her head. “What in the hell is going on?”

“Look,” he panted, ejecting his thermal clip. “You help me clear out these mechs, I’ll tell you anything you want.”

She pursed her lips, unhappy, but forced to admit they wouldn’t get anywhere in the middle of a firefight. Without pausing to acknowledge the request, she popped over the top of the balcony and shot off a mech’s head. It collapsed instantly.

As she shifted her aim, her skull filled with a buzzing sensation, intense enough to border on pain—though her head was already throbbing so badly it was hard to tell the difference. She glanced down. Beside her, the man gathered a sphere of blue-tinged energy in his hand and tossed it towards the mechs. A pair of them dangled in the air. Shepard shot them too. Biotics no longer impressed her, but she filed the talent away for future use. There was nobody on this station she was willing to trust after those logs and fighting a biotic was different from fighting a common soldier.

Once the last mech fell, he lowered his gun and let out a long breath. Shepard was suddenly very aware that he was outfitted with a hardsuit, the shield a faint blur over the ceramic plates, whereas she was clad in a thin sweat-soaked hospital gown with nothing but a pistol to protect herself. She tugged the cloth down, abruptly self-conscious. With her crouched on the floor it wouldn’t go much past her hip.

His eyes traced the motion. Shepard’s growing sense of violation flared into sudden strength. She stood and took a full step back, set her feet in a fighting stance, and half-raised her weapon. “Let’s try this again. Who are you?”
He eyed her with faint surprise. “Name’s Jacob Taylor. I was with the Alliance, same as you, but it got complicated.”

“I’m out a little while and when I wake up whether you’re in the Alliance is complicated?”

“Shepard, you were out for two years. A lot’s happened.”

“I… What?” The gun sank as the strength left her arms. “That’s not… that’s not possible… I…”

The world had gone gray at the edges. Jacob’s mouth opened; he was clearly speaking, but she couldn’t hear any of the words. A kind of poison was sweeping through her body. She stumbled towards the balcony rail. “Two years-“

She reached it just in time, leaning out of the edge and dry-heaving until her throat was so ragged from the spasms that she thought it might tear. Nothing more than a bit of bile came up.

“Easy there.” Jacob put a tentative hand on her shoulder. “You haven’t had any solid food since you got here.”

She jerked away as though burnt, and sank to the floor. Two years.

Her voice came from far away. “Where’s here?”

“This is Lazarus Station. Our scientists have been working all this time to bring you back, since about a month after the Normandy went down.”

Shepard turned her head. Her words were rough in the air, barely more than a whisper, or a growl. Her throat still didn’t want to work. “What do you mean, bring me back?”

“I’m no doctor, but you were in bad shape. First time I saw you, you were nothing but meat and tubes. Anywhere else they’d have measured you for a coffin. The Alliance declared you killed in action, and I’m not sure they were wrong.”

“I was dead?” Two years dead, her brain interjected. She tried to ignore it. Just thinking about it made her stomach lurch again. “How do you fix dead?”

“I don’t know the details. Miranda talked about it sometimes- they developed a lot of new technology- cybernetics, some tissue cloning, a few extra bits and pieces. You should ask her about it.”

She took a few deep breaths and tried not to imagine their hands in her guts, pawing over her like she was an autopsy. “Is my crew alive?”

“Didn’t catch that.”

She forced herself to talk louder. “Is my crew safe?”

“From the SR-1? There were casualties. I don’t remember all the names.”

The next question, about whether he remembered Kaidan’s name, or Liara’s, or anyone else, rose in her throat and died on her lips. Jacob worked for these people, whoever they were, these doctors who had spent years playing Frankenstein with her corpse, and there was no rationale to risk trusting him with anything, least of all the names of people she cared about. She needed to find those shuttles, get back to the Alliance, and then she could ask all the questions she liked.

She’d seen people die in shipwrecks. Her imagination painted an image of Kaidan drifting amid
the debris, burned and wounded, those warm brown eyes gone cold. Two years. She took another deep breath. \textit{You ordered him to the escape shuttles. He listened. He got off the ship- he had to. Now you need to get off this station.}

Shepard hauled herself to her feet. Every joint complained. She didn’t know whether it resulted from lying so long on that table or the way stress had her every muscle drawn tighter than a bow string. She shuffled towards the far hatch. \textit{“Have the reapers arrived?”}

Jacob paused, as though confused by the question. \textit{“No.”}

That was one less worry on her plate. She moved down the list. \textit{“Some woman woke me up when the attack began.”}

\textit{“Probably Miranda. She’s the station’s ranking officer and the Lazarus Project was her baby. No way she’d give up on you now.”}

\textit{“We lost contact. Some kind of explosion, then nothing but static on the radio.”}

\textit{“Damn.”} He looked worried- quite a contrast to the casual way he spoke about loading her up with untested technology like a lab rat. Shepard frowned. Jacob didn’t notice. \textit{“She can take care of herself, but…”}

\textit{“How many others were there?”}

Jacob made a dismissive sound in the back of his throat. \textit{“Other what?”}

\textit{“Other subjects.”}

\textit{“There weren’t. Just you.”}

Before Shepard could process that disturbing revelation, the comm burst into life. \textit{“Check. Check. Is anyone on this frequency? Anyone still out there alive? Hello?”}

Shepard recognized the whiny drawl from the project log files. Jacob opened his omni-tool to respond. \textit{“Wilson? This is Jacob. I’m with Commander Shepard in D-Wing.”}

\textit{“Shepard’s awake? What the hell… Never mind. You need to get her out of there. Take the service tunnels and make for the network control room.”}

\textit{“Roger that.”} Jacob turned to her. \textit{“Let’s go.”}

\textit{Two years, two years, two years,} her brain sang, to the rhythm of her feet slapping against the floor as she followed him down several decks, into the electronic heart of the station. The service tunnels were lit red, Jacob a darkened shadow jogging ahead.

Her thoughts were in a haze, almost numb with desperate half-formed questions and a vague, unfathomable grief slowly taking hold. Two whole years, just gone… The attack felt like yesterday. Her crew dead, some of them at least, their bodies long cold. Kaidan…

\textit{Staring out at the stars past the wreckage of her ship, her last breath long gone, vision fading. Realizing this was the end and she wasn’t ready. One final thought- I’m so sorry Kaidan-}

Jacob all but shoved her down behind a large conduit as they rounded a corner. \textit{“Mechs!”}

The machines marched into the room and turned towards the humans. That part of her was still working- that part of her had been trained to never stop working until she was utterly incapable of
fights. She took out three in rapid succession. Jacob was impressed. “I see the long sleep didn’t hurt your aim.”

Shepard ejected the thermal clip and made no reply. The compliment hung awkwardly in the air. Wilson broke the silence over the radio. “More mechs are converging on your location.”

“I thought you were sending us somewhere safe,” Jacob complained, starting to jog again. Shepard followed just as swiftly.

“I’m doing my- oh god. Oh god!” Gunfire over the comm. Wilson’s voice went up another notch. “They’ve found me! Help!”

Jacob accelerated to a run. Shepard copied him, with no idea where they were going, but certain she’d never find the dock on her own. Her bare feet could barely hold traction. She nearly collided with him as he paused to open a hatch.

On the other side, a bald man in a lab tunic struggled to prop himself against a crate. The room was full of broken mechs, computer equipment, and storage containers- network control, Shepard guessed. His leg bent at an unnatural angle, wet with seeping blood. Her own twinged in sympathy. She’d broken it badly some years before and still felt it, from time to time, in bad pressure or cold baths.

Jacob knelt beside him to assess the damage. Shepard spotted the remains of a mech just ahead of them, and took up station to watch the corridor leading out of the room. The man, Wilson, stank of fear and half-dried blood, and she had no desire to be near him.

“What happened?” Jacob asked.

Wilson shook his head. “Bastard shot me-“ He let out a groan of pain as Jacob touched the wound. “Stop that, would you? It’s broken. Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

Shepard didn’t take her eyes off the hall. “I’ll need splinting if you want to get out of here.”

“No time.” He jerked his head towards the wall. “There’s an emergency kit over there. The inflatable cuff should immobilize it.”

“I got it.” Jacob retrieved the kit and began wrapping the black rubber around his leg, Wilson moaning at the slightest of movements. “What are you doing over here? This is the security wing.”

“Thought I could shut down the mechs. But the whole system’s fried. No way out but to abandon ship.”

*Flames consumed the battery, hot on her face, the hand-held fire extinguisher an absolute joke. Kaidan ran up behind her, worried she wouldn’t bail out. She yelled at him to do his job. Shepard twitched, pushing away at the unwelcome memory before it could gather any steam. Focus, Nathaly. Get to the dock. Freak out later.*

Behind her, Jacob still wasn’t satisfied. “Why do you even have security mech clearance?”

“I was shot! Direct hit to the femur! You think I set this up just to get hurt?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shepard snapped, losing patience with the argument and rapidly running short of personal stamina. “As far as I’m concerned you’re both suspect. If we stay here all our asses are toast. Find the shuttles, and we’ll sort it out later.”
The two men exchanged a glance. Shepard wore the kind of expression that could level cities with a single glare. Jacob was the bravest. “First we find Miranda.”

“Are you crazy?” Wilson said. “She was in D-Wing. They got swarmed. No way she survived.”

“A bunch of mechs won’t drop Miranda,” Jacob said hotly. “She’s alive.”

“Then why haven’t we heard from her? Unless she set all this up!”

Shepard was absolutely exasperated. “She woke me up and warned me, you complete moron. Can we get out of here?”

“We need to save ourselves,” Wilson re-iterated, as Jacob hauled him to his feet and helped him hobble forward.

Shepard ignored that entirely. She was halfway out the hatch when Jacob cleared his throat. “Ok, this is getting tense. If I tell you who we work for, will you trust me?”

She paused, looking over her shoulder, interested despite her urgency. Wilson was peeved. “You really think this is the time?”

“We’re not going to make it if she’s expecting a shot in the back,” he argued. Wilson rolled his eyes, muttering.

Shepard crossed her arms. Jacob took a breath. “The Lazarus Project… the program that rebuilt you… it’s funded and controlled by Cerberus.”

Her face emptied of all expression. Her tone went just as flat. “What.”

Wilson hopped away a step, distancing himself from the pair of them. “The Illusive Man is going to have your balls for lunch, Jacob.”

“I don’t care what the boss thinks.” Jacob moved towards her, his hand outstretched. “I know this must be a shock-“

She raised her pistol. “Touch me and I swear to god, I will kill you.”

“You need to calm down-“

Shepard fired a warning shot that grazed his shields, enough to take them down. She redirected her aim to his head. “Don’t you dare tell me what to do.”

“You’ve torn out your sutures.” Wilson observed her lazily with the smallest of smarmy grins, as if he rather enjoyed seeing the damage.

Not all of the wetness on her gown was sweat. A red patch was growing at her side- not enough to threaten her life, or slow her down. Shepard drew herself up with icy dignity. “I am getting off this station. If either of you tries to touch me again, or tries anything fishy, you’ll be leaving as a corpse. There will be no further warning.”

Jacob and Wilson exchanged a wary glance. She stepped smartly to the side and gestured ahead. “Move out.”

Wilson blanched. “You’re not going to make us go first? I’m a doctor, not some meathead thug!”

“I could always kill you now and find my own way out.”
He turned to Jacob. “You’ll allow her to threaten us like this?”

Jacob clearly hadn’t expected this sort of response. He licked his lips. “The lady’s in charge. I won’t risk Miranda’s wrath, or our health, trying to restrain her.”

“This was a bad investment,” Wilson muttered, but dutifully limped ahead, every footfall a protest. Jacob drew his rifle and took point. “Cerberus isn’t as bad as you think. We fixed you up.”

“Shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you.” Shepard divided her attention between the two known enemies directly ahead, and scanning further afield for additional mechs.

“You can’t pretend you’re not curious.” Jacob’s calm was unshakeable. She wondered if it was the result of confidence or naivety.

Not that it mattered. “Cerberus has been lying to me since ’77. I don’t see why I should believe any of you now.” Her eyes spotted movement. “Mech at one o’clock.”

They both raised their weapons and fired. It twitched and died. Jacob blew out a breath. “You’ve had a poor introduction to our organization. Ok. I get it. This is different. We need you. Humanity needs you.”

“I don’t work for goddamn terrorists.” She bent and retrieved another thermal clip from the downed mech, and loaded it into her pistol. “I’m an officer of the Alliance Navy, and that’s exactly where I’m going as soon as I find a shuttle off this benighted station. If you are very, very lucky, I might not take you back to Arcturus with me.”

Wilson had a nasty laugh. “I liked you better when you were drugged up and silent.”

“Quiet,” Jacob ordered. He handed Wilson the mech’s pistol. “We’re almost to the dock. If Miranda’s anywhere, that’s where she’ll meet us. The situation is FUBAR enough already.”

Shepard wagered he was right. The room past the next hatch was full of cargo crates, just what she’d expect from a station dock. She didn’t waste any concern on whether Miranda was waiting. It was a Cerberus station. They deserved whatever came for them.

Shock, however, was giving way to disgust and anger. “Was this retaliation? I stopped you following Saren’s research, so you run some kind of sick experimental program on me for two damn years? How in the hell did you even get my body?”

Jacob stopped in his tracks. His face was bewildered—almost hurt. “We saved your life.”

Wilson started laughing again. “Miranda’ll love this.”

“Keep moving,” Shepard growled.

They walked up a loading ramp. A pair of hatches end-capped the balcony above. As soon as they stepped onto it, the hatches opened, and a swarm of mechs began to fire.

Shepard plastered her back to a crate. She didn’t much care whether Jacob or Wilson lived, but without their help, without a hardsuit, with only a single spare thermal clip, it was unlikely she could survive this many mechs. “Pull back! Find cover!”

Jacob hauled Wilson behind a crate. His leg dragged along the floor, with Wilson shouting curses the whole way. As soon as he was safe, Jacob dropped him, and started shooting across the top.
After a moment gathering his stamina, Wilson leaned out from around the crate and did the same.

Shepard left them the group coming from the far end of the balcony. She had her hands full with the closer set. She could barely get two shots off before she had to duck back into cover. And every time she did, they advanced another several paces on her position.

She popped in her last thermal clip. Her first shot took off one mech’s head. Two mechs left. She swung her arm, taking aim, but before she could fire a line of lightening sizzled over her skin. Shepard drew back and swore.

A long raw patch of singed flesh was scraped into her arm, about a finger’s width. Her nose filled with broiled meat overlaid by the tang of blood. It burned like hell. She missed her shielding.

But that quick glance to ensure the wound was as inconsequential as it felt turned into a fixation. Her eyes ran the length of her arm. Everywhere, it was crossed by rude orange scars, jagged in the flesh, thrumming with a cybernetic glow. The battle faded into the background. She ran her fingers over them. They didn’t hurt; she was familiar with cybernetic therapy but usually the implants were hidden beneath the skin, where the light could barely be seen even if you knew where to look. And, usually, one or two might be used to treat injury. Her arm was riddled with them.

“Shepard!” Jacob yelled.

A mech rounded the corner of her freight container. She only avoided serious injury thanks to instincts honed by years of experience. Lunging towards the mech, she diverted its firing arm and shoved her own weapon against its chest. Two shots and it was down.

Jacob shot the last one. Wilson was staring at her. She took a breath. “I’m ready to leave.”

Jacob eyed the grazing wound and raised his eyebrows. “You want the doc here to take a quick look at that?”

Two years of Cerberus having any kind of look they wanted at her. Her lips thinned. “I’d rather die.”

He didn’t seem to know how to reply. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Shuttle’s this way.”

They went up the ramp, tagged the hatch, and came face-to-face with the dark-haired woman from the logs.

She was tall— not as tall as Shepard, but enough to notice— and porcelain-skinned, almost too smooth to be real. Those big blue eyes narrowed instantly as she took in the group.

Wilson was visibly shocked. “Miranda! But you were—”

The woman raised her pistol and shot him in the face without any preamble whatsoever. “Dead?”

Jacob stared at the body. Wilson died immediately, but his blood continued to spread across the floor. “What the hell are you doing?”

She glanced up at him. “My job.”

Shepard realized Miranda was absolutely furious, though not with them. A cold, hard rage underwrote every word. Her gaze on Wilson’s slowly cooling corpse should have reduced it to ashes.
Miranda stepped over him and put a hand on her hip. The gesture was surely unconscious, but it drew attention to her shapely body, clad in a tight-fitting black-and-white cat suit with the stylized Cerberus logo, a pointed black-and-orange “O”, emblazoned on the breast like a point of pride. Even if Jacob hadn’t spilled the beans, Shepard would have recognized that symbol anywhere.

Miranda lifted her chin and leveled a stare at the pair of them. “Wilson betrayed us all.”

Shepard kept her weapon ready. She had no idea who betrayed whom, and didn’t really care. They were all Cerberus. What difference did it make which of them specifically turned the mechs against the station?

Miranda took note of it and raised two perfect eyebrows. The woman was almost criminally beautiful, and self-assured to the point of alienation. Nobody shot their colleague of two years like taking afternoon tea. There should be something—regret, satisfaction, glee. Not just cold anger over a betrayal. The lack of any emotion over the act itself left Shepard disconcerted, and certain Miranda would shoot her just as coldly, if it became necessary. And Shepard was still injured from her surgeries, with very little in the way of equipment.

“How can you be sure?” Jacob said aloud. He was considerably more troubled by the corpse.

“Because I’m always right. You should know that by now.” Miranda nodded towards the shuttle behind her. “Come on. Let’s get out of here. My boss wants a word with you.”

It took a conscious act of will to avoid raising her gun further. She didn’t want this woman to see her discomfort. Not when she was this vulnerable. “You mean the Illusive Man? I know you work for Cerberus.”

Oddly enough, Miranda relaxed a hair, her expression softening into something resigned and tinged with faint affection. “Ah, Jacob. I should have known your conscience would get the better of you.”

He accepted the mild criticism with grace. “Lying to the commander isn’t the way to get her to join our cause.”

Shepard tired of the entire charade. Watching them exchange old familiar barbs after her entire world turned inside-out was insulting. “What does Cerberus want with me?”

Miranda blinked. “Maybe you should ask the Illusive Man when you meet him.”

“I’m asking you.” Her finger tensed against the trigger. The muzzle still pointed at the floor, but Shepard couldn’t remember the last time she was so anxious. She forced herself to ease back. “You’re the Lazarus Project director, aren’t you?”

“I am. I put two years of my life into you.” She was staring at her more intently now, sizing her up. “He poured virtually unlimited resources into your… resuscitation. Obviously he has some plan for you.”

“And you don’t care what that is?”

“I did my part. I brought you back and kept you safe.” Miranda glanced again at the shuttle. “We need to leave.”

“You’re not worried about the rest of your team?”

“If they’re not here, they’re not coming.” She tilted her head. “Don’t you get it? The only one worth saving here is you. Everyone else is expendable.”
“She’s right,” Jacob added. “We all knew the risks.”

Shepard looked from Jacob to Miranda. Their faces were empty of everything but a vague anticipation of leaving soon. She thought about how she stopped at every room, trying to find her own crew. “You’re just going to leave them here. You don’t give a single damn.”

“It’s not like that-“Jacob started.

She pushed past the both of them, each step deliberate and surprisingly firm, for someone wearing no shoes. “Where are we going?”

Miranda opened the shuttle hatch. “Another Cerberus facility- Minuteman Station. The Illusive Man is waiting to contact you there.”

Shepard stared at the interior. “And if I don’t come with you?”

“Then feel free to stay and rot with the mechs,” Miranda snapped, the first genuine reaction Shepard had gotten from her since they met.

Shepard licked her lips. There were no other shuttles, and plenty of mechs behind them. She chose survival and stepped aboard.

Miranda and Jacob settled into couches across from her. The shuttle was clearly military surplus of some kind, but Cerberus made a few luxury upgrades. The couches were padded and upholstered with a soft, tough fabric. Rather than bare metal struts, the interior was walled off with plastic bulkheads. Handholds riveted into the walls and ceiling provided something to grab in the event of turbulence. Everything was the same clean white as the station, accented in orange and black.

Shepard sat down as though the cushion might bite her. The hatch shut behind them.

The pilot was a shadowy figure in a separate cabin. Shepard could just barely glimpse him through the smoked acrylic screen dividing the rooms. Miranda spoke a few quiet words, and they departed the station. Shepard watched the port turn black and dusted with stars. It should have been comforting; she’d lived her whole life in space. But now it only made her feel trapped.

Miranda was pleased. Her eyes studied Shepard, critical, taking in her condition. They lingered on the bloody stain decorating Shepard’s hospital gown. “You got out in one piece, but not unscathed. Anything serious?”

“I’ll live.” She sat back, and folded her arms over the spot to hide it. Miranda’s gaze made her feel dirty. Every part of her ached, and the bullet graze still stung like crazy. She badly wanted some medi-gel for it, more to numb the wound than protect it, but she was damned if she’d reveal any weakness to these people. The stupid pistol with its stupid disposable heat sink felt annoyingly comforting in her hand.

“Good.” Miranda reached into a cabinet- Shepard tensed despite herself- and withdrew a datapad. She tapped at it without looking up. “Before we arrive, we need to ask a few question to evaluate your condition. It wasn’t my intention to wake you so abruptly, or in such violent circumstances.”

“What circumstances were you imagining where realizing I’ve been dead for two years wouldn’t be abrupt?”

Miranda favored Jacob with another glare. “I wouldn’t say dead. I know all this comes as a shock-“
“Oh, spare me.” She looked away, out the port.

Miranda paused, longer than was necessary. “I need to evaluate your cognitive function.”

Shepard made no response. Jacob attempted to diffuse the situation. “Come on, Miranda. More tests? We fought across half the station. She’s fine.”

“I promised the Illusive Man she’d be exactly as she was before,” Miranda said, testily. “If her personality and memories aren’t intact, she’s not ready to meet him.”

Jacob shook his head. Miranda read off the datapad. “We’ll start with personal history.”

“This is a waste of time,” Shepard said.

“You were a spacer kid. Your family was military and you moved with your parents’ postings, living on one ship or another.”

“That’s not true.” Shepard didn’t bother to look at her. “Bringing your kids aboard ship is a last resort. There’s just not enough room. I lived with extended family, or in base housing aboard stations, rarely on a ship. We moved a lot, sure. I’d think someone who used to be in the navy would know that.”

Jacob had the grace to be embarrassed. Miranda cleared her throat. “You enlisted when you were eighteen.”

“It wasn’t my idea. Kind of like everything that’s happening now.”

“The sooner you silence your disdain, the sooner this will be over.”

“You haven’t asked me one damn question yet.”

“Tell me about after enlistment.”

She’d been good at shooting things and terrible at taking orders- things Miranda clearly didn’t know, or Shepard doubted she’d attempt this conversation. Had a C.O. early on who thought she could do better, and recommended her for spec ops against all sound advice. Shepard gave Miranda her very best look of boredom. “You don’t have a cigarette, do you?”

“No.”

Shepard ran her hand back over her hair. “Figures.”

It felt all wrong. Out of habit, she expected her fingers to skim over long, smooth strands, pulled tight against her scalp by her familiar bun. Instead, they raked through her hair with ease. Shepard pulled at a clump, experimentally, running her fingertips from root to end. It wasn’t more than five centimeters long.

She was utterly horrified.

Miranda didn’t notice. “When you were twenty-three, you survived a thresher maw attack that killed the rest of your unit.”

Shepard stopped examining her hair.

Miranda carried on, oblivious. “How did you manage to survive? I’ve always been curious.”
“Nobody working for Cerberus gets to ask me about Akuze.” She leaned forward. Her voice had dropped into a low, dangerous whisper, full of promise. “And I don’t have to answer a damn one of your questions. I am not your test subject.”

“I wasn’t even involved in what happened there. You won’t get anywhere treating us like we’re all the same.”

“You are all the same.” Shepard turned back to the port, a dismissal, her complete contempt written in every line of her body.

Jacob furrowed his brow. “I don’t get it.”

Shepard actually laughed, without a trace of humor. Miranda shifted uncomfortably. “One of our… less stable operations was responsible for drawing the maws to the Alliance. It was a misguided attempt to study thresher maw behavior. I doubt the deaths were intentional.”

Shepard snorted her disbelief. Jacob’s frown deepened. “You never told me that.”

“It was nearly a decade ago. It has nothing to do with present-day Cerberus.” She shook her head, annoyed, and turned back to Shepard. “After that, you-“

“Enough, Miranda.” Jacob raised his voice, cutting off her next question. “You don’t think her memory’s intact? Come on.”

She pursed her lips. “I guess we’ll just have to hope the Illusive Man accepts our little field test as evidence enough.”

Shepard went on ignoring them. She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arm around her legs, keeping her nominal attention on the stars beyond their hull, listening to them whisper together. They’d get to this station, and she’d get a look at what she had to work with. But one thing was certain. Shepard might have been a Cerberus prisoner for the past two years, but she had no intention of remaining one.
Meet the Illusive Man

July 2185

Several uncomfortable and largely silent hours later, they arrived at Minuteman Station.

The dock was sterile white, like everything else Shepard had seen of Cerberus, and devoid of human personnel. A soft-spoken VI greeted them as they disembarked. Shepard felt out-of-place and filthy in the grungy hospital gown, her limbs etched with glowing implant scars. On the shuttle she discovered they extended down her legs and other arm as well, and likely places she couldn’t see, not without alerting her Cerberus escorts that she was searching.

Jacob was one thing. He was assigned to security and oblivious to the science- and probably a few other things. She didn’t like Miranda so much as glancing at her, knowing she’d examined her inside and out with total impunity for years, approving procedures without a moment’s thought for consent. She didn’t like acknowledging that Miranda knew more about her body now than she did herself. She hated even more that she was afraid to ask. Cerberus loved nothing better than perverting science past all boundaries of ethics or rationality, and there was no telling what they might have done to her.

Nothing felt right. Her skull remained irritatingly light- all the absent weight of her missing hair- and her muscles ached from being pressed into such sudden use after long inactivity. Clearly Cerberus did some physical therapy while she was comatose, or she wouldn’t have been able to stand, but it wasn’t the same as real exertion. Her joints grated as though filled with sand. The broken suture in her side throbbed with a dull, nagging pain too slight to be serious but too loud to push out of mind, and the bullet graze was a line of fire. On top of everything, her head was pounding. An overload of shock and adrenaline plus waking abruptly from a two-year coma made for a terrific headache.

Shepard stared out at the dock and tried to push past the wealth of discomfort, and get her bearings. Miranda dusted her hands briskly, just as glad to be off the shuttle. “Let’s get you into some real clothes, shall we?”

In spite of the circumstances, just then, nothing sounded better than the possibility of being clean. Shepard followed Miranda out of the dock and down another hallway. Either the station was lightly populated or this section was cleared in advance of their visit, but they saw very few staff as they walked. What few attendants were present stopped what they were doing and stared until manners caught up with them. Their whispers followed them down the corridor.

One whole side of the passageway was a double-walled glass port affording a terrific view of the cosmos. This part of the station faced away from the system star, no planet visible. Shep heard the impression they were in a solar orbit. They hadn’t traversed a relay to get here, which still felt odd, but it was a problem for once she found a way off the station.

“This way,” Miranda said, tagging open a hatch.

It was a locker room of sorts. Several showers were clustered behind a modesty partition of frosted glass. At the front of the room, towels piled up on long benches, and cubbies sunk into the wall held black and white clothing, labeled by size.

Miranda handed her a towel. “There’s soap and shampoo waiting in the showers. Hand me your
gown and I’ll dispose of it.”

She stepped into the shower and tried to untie the gown. Dried sweat had tightened the knots. She gave up and tore them out, tossing the ruined tunic over the partition and turning on the water.

On the other side of the glass, Miranda moved off, first to the trash chute, then to a comm terminal stationed near the door. The water was too loud for Shepard to make out what was being said. Miranda had her back to her, and Shepard took the few minutes of unexpected privacy to take a quick inventory.

More of the orange cybernetic scars scattered her torso and rear. Without a mirror, she couldn’t see her back, but the evidence seemed conclusive: Cerberus had extensively re-wired her nervous system. She didn’t know how to feel about that. She’d lost muscle mass. There were other scars too, old incisions she didn’t recognize, some faded to almost nothing while others were freshly scabbed. A few still had sutures, including the one that pulled open. A bit of blood continued to seep out; her fingers came away red when she gently prodded it.

Her sense of invasion grew with every mark. The urgency of the attack let her ignore it; then, on the shuttle, the threat of two Cerberus personnel forced her to bury it. Now, she hugged herself in the cascading water, shivering despite its pleasant heat, and tried to calm her twitching nerves and rising panic. They weren’t out of the woods yet. This was no time for a breakdown. She took a shaky breath and reached for the soap as though it could wash their stain off of her.

The familiar mechanical act of scrubbing away the grime soothed her somewhat. By the time she was finished, her self-control had returned, the momentary lapse carefully locked down until she was safe enough to deal with it.

Shepard wrapped herself in the towel and returned to the main room.

Miranda was waiting with a selection of medical supplies. “We should treat your most recent injuries before they get any worse.”

“I’ll do it,” Shepard said, too quickly. She snatched up the medi-gel and bandages before Miranda could object.

Miranda frowned, but held her peace. “I’ve alerted Cronos Station that we successfully escaped the attack instigated by Dr. Wilson. The Illusive Man is standing by to speak with you.”

Shepard filled the gunshot graze with medi-gel - blissful relief - and taped a large swath of gauze over it. “And if I don’t want to speak with him?”

“You’re not a prisoner here.” Miranda maintained her indifference, though it was clear by now that it was an act. Shepard was getting under her skin. “But the man’s spent billions of credits bringing you back. That doesn’t interest you at all?”

“I’m not for sale.” She shifted on the bench and pulled the towel aside, enough to see the busted incision, not enough to sacrifice her privacy. She tore open a sterile cleaning pad.

“Is it so hard to acknowledge that we saved your life? Your Alliance left you to rot in the Terminus. A lot of people were interested in recovering your body, but not them.” She leaned forward. “They came and got your crew, and left the dead back at Alchera.”

Shepard imagined herself being passed from owner to owner, like a scrapped ship. She shuddered involuntarily, and then flushed with anger, annoyed by the small slip in her composure. “I’d never expect the Alliance to concentrate on the dead at the expense of the living, in the Terminus least of
all. I’m just glad they came to get us out.”

The greater nightmare was the possibility that her crew had made it to Alchera’s surface and died there of other causes, awaiting a rescue that never came due to political risks. They’d been the darlings of the Alliance for so long that Shepard forgot how that felt. It was an accepted part of her duty up until commanding the *Normandy*. Funny how being responsible for so many people changed things.

Shepard finished cleaning the wound and reached again for the medi-gel tube. As she did so, the towel slipped loose and cascaded to her waist. Her arm clamped over her breasts automatically. She didn’t have much to conceal in that regard, but modesty was modesty.

Miranda laughed- a congenial, sorority girl laugh intended to put others at ease. “For god’s sake, we’re both women here. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Shepard felt her face heat, though her skin was too dusky to let it show, and was abruptly quite angry. Miranda picked up a bandage. “Let me help you-”

She snatched it from her hand and fastened it in place, tearing off the medical tape with her teeth, uncaring how much of her was exposed. She refused to grant Miranda that kind of power over her. “Do you have any clothes or am I going in a bath towel?”

“These should fit,” Miranda said, going to a cubby. “I apologize for the lack of small clothes. Most of our staff manage those on their own.”

She held out a uniform cut like Alliance utilities, but that was where the similarities ended. Rather than Alliance blue, the sleeves and the front of the shirt were black, while the elasticized side panels were white. The pants were just the opposite- black over the calves and inner thigh, with white, pocket-laden panels on the outer thigh. Stylized orange “O”’s, distinctly Cerberus, festooned each piece. Shepard regarded the garments with disgust.

Miranda held them out a bit higher, encouraging her to take them. Shepard looked at her like she was out of her mind. “I will go naked before I wear that.”

Director Lawson was out of patience. “Shepard, if our clothes don’t suit you, I’m sure you can buy more at the next port. For now, this is what we have.”

“Fuck this,” she said. “Where is the Illusive Man?”

“The comm room is down the hall to the right-”

The towel dropped off her as she stood and stalked from the room without another word. Not one thread graced her body. Cerberus had been in control long enough, and they had to learn that wasn’t going to work a single second longer.

She ignored the startled glances from the Cerberus staff as she stalked down the hall. Shepard was an imposing figure, taller than any of them, strong, scarred, and angry enough to kill with a glance. They stayed well clear of her path. She entered the darkened comm room, barked an order to the station VI to connect the transmission, and shut the hatch.

The room was lined with scanners. A white patch circled by a single strip of blue light took center stage- a holopad, designed to transmit a three-dimensional image of the speaker.

Cerberus held all the answers to the mystery of what happened to her the last several years. Without the Illusive Man’s help, she doubted she’d ever get close to the truth. On the other hand,
Shepard wasn’t about to sell out just to gain a little peace.

She licked her lips, took a breath, and stepped on the pad. Miranda indicated he wanted her exactly as she was. Shepard could only hope he understood what he ordered. The scan enveloped her with an electronic whir, tracing her body and sending the image out across the void.

The Illusive Man was a graying gentleman in his fifties, dressed in a finely tailored suit and holding an expensive cigarette. He looked like a latter-day mob boss, taking the call in a personal office so ostentatiously utilitarian that Shepard was certain it cost more than her ship. The modern chair that was its sole furnishing sat before an array of holographic screens, most blanked. Behind that was a giant, roiling red sun. He exhaled. “Commander Shepard.”

His eyes widened slightly as her visual loaded in, but that was the full extent of his surprise. “They couldn’t find you something more suitable to wear?”

She sat back on her heel and folded her arms. “If your Miranda wanted me to wear a terrorist-branded uniform, she should have dressed me for a funeral instead of a job.”

He regarded her for a long moment, then hit a haptic button floating along the arm of his chair. “Get me Ms. Lawson, please.”

They waited a full minute, neither saying a word. Miranda’s voice came on the line. The Illusive Man never broke eye contact with Shepard as he answered. “Can we find clothing suited to the Commander’s tastes? Now.”

His finger came off the comm. He sat back and took a drag of his cigarette, his eyes passing over her body clinically, taking in the scars and the bandages. She lifted her chin.

He blew out smoke. “I’m pleased you came through the attack on Lazarus Station with minimal injury.”

“Don’t start.” Her voice was withering. Shepard refused to show the slightest discomfort. Cerberus was accustomed to casual invasions of her privacy, and they needed to understand she would not allow that sort of tactic to succeed. And if she embarrassed him in the bargain, all the better.

They waited a bit longer, each feigning ease in their own spaces, each wary of the other. Shepard took some small satisfaction that the cigarette sat lit in his hand, almost as if he’d forgotten it, like this meeting wasn’t going exactly as he planned. Even if it didn’t seem fair that she was the one with her world upside-down, and he was the one who got to smoke.

Miranda came rushing in. It was the first time Shepard had seen her uncollected; even in the middle of Wilson’s betrayal, Miranda was as calm as though she’d practiced every second already. Now, she stumbled into the scanner, her arms full of terrycloth, and pushed her hair off her face. “I found a bathrobe.”

She helped Shepard into it. Shepard tied the sash, tugged it into place, and turned back to the Illusive Man without a drop of dignity lost. He tapped off his ash and set the cigarette down at last. “I apologize for the abrupt introduction. This is a lot to assimilate in a few short hours.”

“Don’t patronize me.” Her blue eyes flashed. “This cost you a fortune. Why am I here?”

Miranda pursed her lips, offended. The Illusive Man folded his hands. His eyes, Shepard noticed, were cybernetically augmented, the blue-gray circuit lines just barely visible in his pupils. The holographic scan quality was high. Apparently, resurrecting spectres wasn’t the only place...
Cerberus spared no expense. “Colonies are disappearing. In the Terminus, entire human settlements are vanishing overnight.”

That wasn’t the answer she expected, either. She bit her lip.

Shepard guessed not much had changed with regard to Alliance-Terminus relations in the past two years. The Terminus Systems were the only portion of the galaxy truly beyond Council control or influence. As such, the Council had made it very clear they would not tolerate action from any government that might provoke war with the Terminus. That didn’t stop covert missions from being staged. Shepard had participated in many such missions in the course of her career with special operations, the last of which cost her life.

The Alliance would not be able to protect humans who had voluntarily abandoned the safety of its territorial borders. And there was only one force she knew of that could operate on this scale without exposing itself. Jacob said the reapers hadn’t arrived- but Sovereign acted through the geth, until it was sure of its victory.

Shepard frowned. None of this was adding up. “You could have had an army for what you spent bringing me back.”

“I don’t need an army. I need someone who can lead a mission, and get us some answers.”

Shepard felt Miranda shift beside her. Her body barely moved, but suddenly, an ocean of cold was rolling off her. She spoke for the second time. “Sir, we discussed-”

“She’s been awake fewer than twelve hours and already she has you chasing after her.” The Illusive Man’s gaze was just as frigid. “Thank you, Ms. Lawson. You are dismissed.”

For a moment, it seemed Miranda might argue. Then she shook her head, and exited with such deliberate steps Shepard was surprised the floor didn’t shatter beneath her feet, embrittled by her winter.

“Now, where were we?” the Illusive Man asked.

“Who’s taking the colonists?” Shepard hated that she was intrigued. She hated even more that his tactics were deliberately engineered to distract her from the fact that Cerberus used her as a medical playground, only the most recent of their sins, and it was working.

“I don’t know. That’s what I need you to find out.”

Maybe the Alliance couldn’t help, not overtly. But they’d still be outraged. They’d still want to understand this threat, and maybe she could get him to tell her what he knew. “But you have suspicions. Not a great start, holding back.” “I’d rather you make up your own mind.” He took another drag. “About this matter, and about me.”

“I know everything I need to know about you,” she spat.

“We don’t have time for your petty resentment. Humanity is under attack.” He held steady in the face of her scowl, which was pure poison. “We face the greatest threat of our brief existence.”

“If you mean the reapers, just say so.” Shepard crossed her arms. “I fought one. I killed one. Maybe it works with your underlings, but I’m not impressed when you dignify them with mystery.”

“Good to see your memory’s intact,” he said, pleasantly, sidestepping her comment and digging his
cigarette into the ash tray. “How are you feeling?”

Her eyes could have ignited helium. “You will never have the right to ask me that question.”

He shook his head, echoing Jacob and Miranda. “Cerberus isn’t as evil as you believe. You and I are on the same side. We just have different methods.”

That was beyond what she could tolerate, even for answers. Shepard turned to go. A little anger entered his tone. “I would have expected Commander Shepard to be more curious about how the reapers are involved with these disappearances.”

She looked over her shoulder. “I don’t trust you to tell me the truth. You haven’t so far.”

“I disagree.”

“I died two years ago. There weren’t human colonies in the Terminus then, not large ones. Not enough to sustain these kinds of attacks.” She folded her arms and faced him. “You didn’t bring me back for this.”

“Correct. I brought you back because humanity needs Commander Shepard. We need somebody with your ability to unite people against the reapers. If I could do that, I wouldn’t need Cerberus. If Miranda could do that, she wouldn’t be working for me. You are, terribly unusual as it is, unique.”

Clearly, the Illusive Man wasn’t privy to the sheer mountain of shit she’d had to climb to get anywhere back in ‘83. Unite people her ass. And she was getting whiplash from his shifting assaults on her ironclad distrust, trying to find a way in, words to make her forget what he was. “Flattery won’t make me like you any better.”

“I’d be disappointed if it did. You and I are alike in this way- we both believe actions are a person’s true measure.”

“I agree. And what I’ve seen of yours tells me all I owe you is a bullet.” She took a step towards him. “I’m going back to Arcturus. If you want to try to stop me, be my guest. I’ll kill every last traitor on this station if I have to.”

“What for?” he asked, candidly. “The navy and Council have suppressed even the mere discussion of reapers. What you found on Eden Prime and what we’ve found since Sovereign’s defeat gave us a fighting chance, and it’s being squandered, by everyone but Cerberus.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said, flatly. “And even if I did, I don’t buy for a second that Cerberus helps anyone. All you know how to do is maim and kill and call it science. All you can do is murder innocent humans and call it advancement.”

“That science saved your life.”

“You made me into an experiment.”

“We gave you an opportunity.” His eyes went very cold. “The reapers will drive us to extinction. If they succeed, then everything you sacrificed was for nothing. Everyone you’ve lost died for nothing.”

For a moment, she was back on the shores of Virmire, screaming into an abyss the shape of Ashley’s body bag. As if she wailed loud enough it could call her back through that hole.
Putting the muzzle of her pistol to Benezia’s chest. Liara falling down beside her mother without so much as a sound.

Stepping over the dead on the Normandy as she walked through the flames.

Twisting in the void as she tried to stopper a rip in her suit her fingers couldn’t quite reach. Trying to apologize to Kaidan as death dragged her down into its darkness, for failing him, for leaving him, for hurting him.

If even the smallest part of what Cerberus claimed was true, how could she tell any of them her anger was worth more than the price they paid?

The Illusive Man let her sit with that for several minutes. Shepard grasped after words that wouldn’t come. It was all she could do to keep breathing. She was angry at him, and at herself, at nothing and everything. Because this was more than a ploy. It was true.

Then he folded his hands. Leaned towards her, his gaze unwavering. “And they’ve chosen the Terminus as their battleground. It’s no coincidence. They believe nobody can confront them here. I mean to teach them otherwise.”

A lifetime ago, she’d sat in a bar and told Kaidan that it wasn’t any accident they found Ilos in the Terminus, or that Sovereign had Saren build his stronghold on the border. That if the reapers were smart, they’d hide any tracks they left behind in an area so remote and dangerous nobody could find them.

Shepard wrapped her arms around her middle, feeling sick, and looked away. “How many?”

“Hundreds of thousands of colonists. And that’s just the last six months. They could have been operating on a smaller scale for far longer. Years. The Alliance has been blaming the abductions on mercs and pirates, real enough threats. It’d be easy to hide small raids in the noise.”

Just the thought of working with Cerberus, on anything, for any length of time, made her stomach clench. But she understood as well as him that the Alliance had their hands full with their official territory, without stretching into Terminus space and risking the Council’s wrath. They might sit on the Council now, but they were still outnumbered by the other representatives. Assuming they’d managed to keep their seat while she was out of it. Assuming the Council did take the reaper threat so lightly that they still feared the Terminus Systems more.

She rubbed her eyes, and looked back at him. Raw and enervated and trying her damnedest not to show either. “I’m not promising anything, and I know I’ll regret this- but what is it, exactly, that you want me to do?”

“I have a shuttle waiting to depart for Freedom’s Progress in the morning. The colony vanished overnight only a few days ago. We’ve never been able to examine a site so soon after an attack. I want you to go there with Miranda and Jacob, and look for the evidence we both want.”

“Stop it with the hard sell. You’re exhausting me.” She massaged her aching forehead. “I’ll take a look. That’s it.”

“I brought you back into the world. With us or without us- it’s up to you to do the rest.” He hit the disconnect and suddenly Shepard was alone in the dark comm room.

She adjusted the robe and left.

Miranda was nowhere in sight. One of the staffers showed Shepard to a cubby-hole room on an
upper deck. It afforded her a dramatic view of the station spread out below, through a bulkhead constructed entirely of glass. It made the spacer kid in Shepard nervous. Logically, she knew any port like that would be safeguarded by an emergency mass effect field, but emotionally, she preferred the security of smaller windows.

She spent a lot of that night on the extranet verifying what Cerberus told her, unable to relax enough to sleep aboard their station, in their presence. It was indeed 2185. She’d turned thirty, and then thirty-one, without noticing. There were human colonies in the Terminus, more than two years ago. Some were independent operations founded by people who found even the Traverse too constricting. Others were attempts by nations back on Earth to stake a claim. They resented the Alliance, even most of the signatories. They understood they’d been eclipsed by history and didn’t like it.

Some of those colonies had disappeared, partially or in whole. Cyrene, six months ago, with five thousand men, women, and children- too big to ignore, too small to cause serious worry. Then Eos Terminal, an ag colony home to over eleven thousand. Then Chani Research Station, a small step backwards, two thousand people. And on, and on, and on. Fourteen colonies and almost four hundred thousand people since 2183, just gone.

Then Freedom’s Progress, the largest yet, a flagship colony of the Terminus if ever one existed. That attack alone more than doubled the missing. Their enemy grew bold.

The scant handful of survivor accounts were next to useless. Only people on the outskirts, unaffected by the primary attack, managed to survive, and they knew nothing. The attacks appeared to be accelerating. And the colonists were entirely on their own- nobody other than the Alliance had the resources to defend them. Not even Cerberus. They might be able to eliminate the root cause, but until then, the abductions would continue. Certainly, Shepard on her own couldn’t do much. And despite the rising controversy back home, the navy wasn’t doing much either, as predicted.

Most of Shepard’s adult life centered on protecting humans from the hazards of galactic life. The idea of people she could help going defenseless made her uncomfortable, indignant. But Cerberus made her skin crawl.

I just said I’d look, she reminded herself. Maybe she’d find something at the colony that made her next move clear. At the least, it would give her some intel to take back to the navy, try to plead the colonists’ case. Or deliver more proof that the reaper threat could not be ignored. Because it turned out the Illusive Man was sadly correct on that front as well. Any mention of the reapers had become laughable, and that made her angrier than the rest of it put together.

She studiously avoided looking up any information about the Normandy wreck or its crew. Not knowing was killing her, but certainty that Cerberus was monitoring all of her extranet activity stayed her curiosity. She didn’t want them knowing how much she cared. It was clear the Illusive Man would do his best to manipulate her, and Shepard didn’t want to hand him any ammunition he didn’t already have. She was bad enough at that sort of game without shooting herself in the foot.

But she did find quite a bit of bizarre news as she waited for morning. The galaxy had produced no fewer than eight biographies on her since her death, and that wasn’t counting the books and documentaries in which she was a central character. The latest of this latter category was a hotly anticipated Citadel tell-all entitled, of all things, Juggling the Monkeys, whose author maintained the Council had plans to arrest her. That in itself wasn’t tremendously hard to buy, but his further claim that the Council was aware of geth outside the Veil prior to Eden Prime was just plain unsettling.
There was also hard news— a slave ring broken by a spectre, Tela Vasir, on a salarian planet. Evidently the methods she employed to interrogate the batarian ringleader had roused a bit of scandal. Shepard, reminded of her own treatment of Balak, moved on quickly. A corporate war on a krogan colony called Garvug was attracting more attention than that sort of thing seemed to merit. But she’d been out of the loop so long context eluded her.

Eventually the volume of information she’d missed over the past two years overwhelmed her, and she retreated to the bed, though she still couldn’t sleep. Instead she drew her knees up to her chin and stared out that ridiculous window.

Minuteman Station revolved slowly to avoid overheating. She watched the sun rise and set throughout the night, her thoughts drifting away from her predicament and back to Alchera.

It started out as such an ordinary morning. They were wrapping up scanning the sector for geth activity before returning to the Citadel. Kaidan slipped into her quarters late the previous evening. He was transferring off the ship because balancing a rather deep personal relationship with an equally complicated professional one was unsustainable, and they’d been less than discreet in the weeks leading up to his last day. She’d had the pleasure of waking up beside him. She hadn’t had nearly enough mornings like that.

He tried to persuade her to stay, just a little longer. She couldn’t imagine what was so important that she insisted on rising. Because she had to relieve Pressly on the bridge? Had it ever mattered if she was a little late for a watch change?

If she closed her eyes, she could still feel his arms around her, pulling her back down to the bed, his kisses warm against her shoulder. She felt like she’d been so close to something truly important and now it was two years later and everything was different. Every moment since she woke up in that lab, whenever his name crossed her mind, she shoved it out just as quickly. She knew if she let herself start to think about him she wouldn’t be able to stop.

They were so worried what might happen with their mission or careers that they never thought to worry about what they might miss by caring too much about the wrong things.

He ran to find her while the Normandy fell apart around them. Kaidan knew her too well. He was terrified she’d go down with the ship, and while that wasn’t her conscious intention, a part of her wondered— if she hadn’t lingered in the CIC, mesmerized by the wreckage, or if she never glanced up for the indulgence of one last regret after shoveling Joker into that shuttle— maybe, maybe she wouldn’t be here now. Maybe she’d have two years of memories like that morning rather than the one she just experienced.

Shepard stared out that absurdly large port at the stars slowly revolving out of frame, and thought, please be alive. Shepard didn’t think she could handle Kaidan’s death on top of everything else.
The mission to Trident wasn’t a total loss. Those tenuous leads, combined with several new intercepted communications, led to the discovery that Cerberus was using the Blue Suns as a delivery service throughout the Terminus. Including one that never arrived. Now Alenko, Nguyen, and North were en route to the Pangaea Expanse—after much argument with Command about using the Mu Relay to enter the Terminus.

Since the Battle of the Citadel, activity in the system had gone from less than nothing to a regular parade of troublemakers and glory seekers, searching for Prothean artifacts. North’s forensic analysis of the intel revealed that Cerberus was routing shipments through the quasi-legal Mu Relay, using the recent uptick to hide themselves, and do a little relic-hunting of their own. Cerberus interest in advanced technology wasn’t surprising, though Alenko hadn’t realized they possessed the resources to go after Prothean relics so aggressively.

But that wasn’t what put them on this run. The missing shipment was due two months ago to one Dr. Gavin Archer, identified only as a researcher on Project Lazarus.

Alenko didn’t know or particularly care about Archer. He wasn’t among the scientists he met when he visited Lazarus Station, but Lawson had over a hundred staff. CT squad continued to find tantalizing glimpses of Lazarus, buried in shipping manifests and technology inventories and casually dropped from the mouths of the leads they found inside the Traverse, who didn’t seem to know much about the project apart from its existence. Some of them were confusing, believing Lazarus had gone on for five or ten years, not a mere two, but Alenko was in no position to correct them. He still couldn’t make up his mind if he wanted the Alliance to find Lazarus.

Surely, the longer it took, the more likely Nathaly would survive when they found her. But Lawson’s warning, that the Alliance would only let her die again if she wasn’t ready, haunted him. As did the knowledge that playing out the schedule increased the odds that Cerberus would enact whatever plans they had for her waking. Alenko couldn’t imagine that ending well.

So he gave his full and honest effort in trying to locate Lazarus cell, and kept his mouth shut about the project’s purpose. What else could he do?

“Five minutes,” Velasquez announced from the corvette’s bridge. They were approaching the unknown transport, presumed Blue Suns chartered by Cerberus, but could be anything if their intel was bad. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Alenko moved to the fore of the ship, craning his neck as he searched for their target, trying to ignore his mixed feelings about returning here. Ilos was a bright red dot out the starboard port. “Shouldn’t they have seen us by now?”

Their corvette, the SSV Starling, was a small vessel designed for short-duration missions of ten crew or less, and armed to match. Like most smaller Alliance ships new off the line the past two years, it incorporated some of the Normandy’s cutting-edge stealth technologies, but he doubted it would be enough to save them against a determined enemy, and it offered no optical concealment. Truth be told Alenko lost his faith in stealth over Alchera two years ago.

Nguyen shared his doubt. She folded her arms. “What’s it doing?”
“It’s drifting.” Lieutenant Velasquez, their pilot for this run, gestured at the window with a frustration that could not quite mask her tension. “Cold as hell, too. Life support’s offline.”

“Maybe this’ll be easier than we thought,” Alenko said, not believing it. He glanced aft into the crew cabin. “Prepare for boarding. Private North, where the hell is your armor?”

North, who had not looked up from her datapad for the last three days, started and shot to her feet. “Sir. Finding it now, sir.”

Alenko ignored this lack of discipline. North was a good kid. Hard to focus, but smart and possessed of a cautious respect for the fragility of her own hide. He’d take that over a reckless marine intent on glory any day, and they hadn’t yet found a computer system she couldn’t crack.

Which naturally brought his attention to Nguyen, who had removed her armor only grudgingly to make use of the Starling’s microscopic shower, and now wore a feral smile as she awaited docking. Seven months of working together under better circumstances had resulted in a detente, but they still rubbed each other wrong. He couldn’t quite overcome the poor first impression from his stint aboard the Agincourt, and her constant smug aggression earned only his disdain.

He shook his head to clear it. Sleep had been elusive on the trip out, and he was looking forward to this being over. “Could be a trap.”

Nguyen slapped in a thermal clip, prepping her rifle. “I hope it’s a trap. I wouldn’t mind bagging a few of those mercs. Worse than beasts.”

Velasquez snorted. “Or they’re just soldiers unlucky enough to be born on the Terminus side of an arbitrary border.”

“Yeah? Tell that to the colonists they’ve helped abduct, and probably tortured and killed. If they act like beasts, I’m going to put them down like beasts.”

“That’s enough,” Alenko said, his patience wearing thin after being stuck on a ship far too small to hold her ego, or her swagger.

“You’ve been sour as a turd all the way out here.” She made a face. “What, your girlfriend forget your goodbye handy?”

North wriggled frantically, her head popping out of the neck of her carbon fiber outer suit, eyes wide with horror. “You can’t say that!”

“Oh, please, I’m not holding my tongue for a freaking officer-“

“No.” North was completely scandalized. “The G-word.”

Her brow furrowed. “The G-word?”

“Girlfriend,” she hissed in a stage whisper, with a frantic glance at Alenko, who put his face in his hand.

“North,” he said, tiredly.

Nguyen was still hopelessly confused. “What the hell?”

North shot him another furtive look and leaned in closer to Nguyen, as if that made any difference on a tiny ship like this. “She died in the war.”
He spoke a bit louder. “North.”

She shut up, but pursed her lips. He was exasperated. “Get the rest of your gear packed. We’re inbound in minutes.”

But Nguyen was watching him with a look that made him nervous. He turned back towards the bridge, and glanced at Velasquez. “We’re going to walk right up to them and dock?”

“Unless you see a reason not to.” She pointed at the display. “There’s some chance they’re luring us in, but in another thirty seconds, we’ll be too close for them to spin up their systems and do anything before we reach them. It’s not like they can get a firing solution on their own docking hatch.”

“Our shield’s at full strength?”
“Yes, sir.”

It was a long thirty seconds while Alenko wondered if they were about to be fired upon, and wondered again if Suns or Cerberus technology could work faster than Alliance intel suggested. But the attack never came. Velasquez drew up beside the ship. “That’s strange. There’s a shuttle already here.”

North finally joined them, ceramic plating only slightly askew. “What’s a shuttle doing this far out?”

“Well, not a shuttle exactly,” Velasquez amended. “More of a flitter, a small personal craft meant for one or two people. They can stay out alone for months. You see them more in the Terminus than back home.”

Alenko crossed his arms. “I bet their life support is running just fine.”

“Appears so.” Velasquez looked up. “ Whoever brought her here didn’t dock. They just threw out a magnetic tether to anchor the ship and boarded on foot.”

Alenko remembered the Fedele’s hatch exploding as Ash tried to open it. “Maybe they know something we don’t.”

Nguyen cracked her neck. “Not salvage. Not with a ship that tiny. They’re after information.”

“Or confirmation,” Alenko added darkly. “Where’s it registered?”

Velasquez’s response was dry. “It’s not broadcasting any identification. Should I send a hail?”

“Just get us docked.” Alenko was too uneasy for her sarcasm.

He thoroughly inspected the hatch both visually and with sensors before overriding the lock and opening the way between their ships. Velasquez kept her pistol close at hand in case of a hostile boarding. Unlike a lot of navy pilots, he knew she kept in practice.

Aboard the Blue Suns ship, every surface was coated in a fine frost. Though still pressurized the temperature had slowly dropped following the loss of life support. His suit sampled the air and determined it was breathable. He opted to endure the chill and remove his helmet, to improve his hearing and periphery vision. Nguyen did the same. North kept her helmet secured.

“Weapons ready,” Alenko ordered, his breath fogging the air. He doubted anyone was still alive but didn’t want to be caught off guard.
Nguyen aimed her rifle ahead. Not a bad choice, despite the tight corridors of the ship. North drew her pistol. Alenko kept his own rifle raised as they crept forward. He took point. If they encountered trouble, he wanted to be the first to find it.

What they discovered, however, wasn’t so much trouble as mystery. The passageway led to the bridge. The pilot slumped in her seat, obviously dead, blood dried on her clothing from a slit throat. Behind her two men lay on the floor. Alenko bent to check them.

Nguyen chewed her lip. “There’s no marks on those guys. What gives?”

“They’re definitely gone.” Alenko frowned, and opened his omni-tool to run a quick scan. “It’s almost like they froze to death. But I don’t know why they wouldn’t have restored life support, or at least sent out a distress signal.”

North queried the ship’s computer. “Systems aren’t disabled. Just offline.”

He straightened. “Can you pull the logs?”

“I already did,” said a familiar voice behind him.

Nguyen fired before Alenko was finished turning. The bullets ricocheted off the asari’s biotic barrier. The newcomer pursed her lips, more annoyed than concerned, and raised her hand. Nguyen instantly froze in place, limned with blue light, her finger halfway through squeezing the trigger a second time.

“Hey!” Alenko stepped between them hurriedly, dividing his attention. When Nguyen got out of that stasis field, she was going to be pissed. “Was that really necessary?”

“She did shoot me,” Liara pointed out, her patent self-composure uncompromised. She wore a custom-built white hardsuit, equipped with the thinner, lighter plating the asari favored, and over it a double-belted jacket that resembled a lab coat. The jacket was open and flared around her almost like a cloak. It seemed she’d found the proper gear to marry her first occupation as an archaeologist with her newfound taste for adventure.

North had more self-control than Nguyen but just as much trepidation. She kept her pistol aimed at Liara’s chest. “You know her, sir?”

“She’s a friend.” He looked back at Liara. “Can you please release my marine?”

“Will she behave herself?”

Alenko met Nguyen’s eyes, aware that she could see and hear everything, even if she couldn’t move. “Yes. She should consider it an order.”

Liara relaxed imperceptibly. Nguyen stumbled as the field released her. She took a step towards Liara, a sneer on her face.

Alenko pushed his hand against her shoulder. “What did I just say?”

Liara seemed amused. Nguyen shoved off him. “How was I supposed to know she was a friendly?”

“You weren’t.” He glanced at Liara. “You could have given us a little warning.”

“It’s good to see you too, Kaidan.” No doubt about it. Her eyes sparkled with suppressed laughter.
North was simply lost. “Care to clue us in, sir?”

He took a breath to compose himself and recover his own surprise. She was the last person he expected to find here. “This is Dr. Liara T’Soni. She’s an old friend. Liara, meet Sergeant Nguyen and Private North.”

Nguyen’s interest sharpened. “Benezia’s daughter?”

“Among other things,” Liara said, with a lightness that betrayed how little she cared for that invocation, to those who knew her well.

Alenko interrupted before that conversation could go much further. “I assume that flitter outside belongs to you? What are you doing here?”

“I might ask you the same question.” She walked over to the pilot’s terminal, ignoring the dead woman in the couch with very un-Liara-like detachment. Alenko’s brow furrowed as she tapped the keys. “I recognized your ship belonged to the Alliance, and was attempting to return to mine before I was discovered. I didn’t expect it to be you.”

Nguyen spun around. “I knew you were up to something—”

“Sergeant, Private, patrol the deck,” Alenko snapped, unwilling to deal with her temper for the remainder of this exchange. From the state of things, and Liara’s casualness, he assumed the rest of the ship was as dead as the bridge crew. All the same, he wasn’t about to send either of them alone. “Report any anomalies over the radio.”

She acknowledged the order, sullenly, and they left the bridge. Liara sat back against the console with a small smile playing about her lips. She’d gotten more evasive since he last saw her, too.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“You,” she said, the smile growing into something more candid. “You tried so hard to be stern with the Normandy’s marines and never quite managed. Now look at you.”

He fiddled with his hands, somewhat embarrassed. “Things change. You’re not quite as withdrawn as you used to be yourself.”

“Life has visited lessons on us both, it would seem.” Liara shook her head. “I’m sorry I haven’t written more often.”

“I’m a bad correspondent, too.” But his brain refused to dwell on pleasantries. “Liara— why are you here? This ship was chartered by Cerberus.”

“I know that now.” She tapped her fingers on the console. “I’ve been looking for signs of the reapers. Data references, artifacts. Eventually, out of other ideas, I returned to Ilos.”

In many ways, the Battle of the Citadel began on Ilos, with Alenko, Liara, and Shepard chasing Saren through the Prothean research station that built the Conduit, a back door onto the Citadel. There they met an ancient, barely-functional VI that revealed the dark history of reaper cycles in its entirety. Alenko could still remember Nathaly’s hand squeezing his as they made their way down. Like she knew what was waiting at the end of that ramp.

“Did you find anything?” he asked.

Liara shook her head. “The entire station ran out of power, after fifty thousand years. I couldn’t restart Vigil. The VI files were completely corrupted.” There was actual pain in her voice— at the
time, she’d wanted to stay and question the VI further. Archaeology would always be her first and greatest passion. “I found a great deal of Prothean remains, and very few answers.”

He blinked. “You opened the life pods?”

“Sarcophagi would be more accurate.” She sighed and leaned back, resting against the ship’s console. “It’s not a bad way to go. Sliding off into oblivion while you’re in stasis. Many of them were quite well preserved.”

Alenko tried not to think of Nathaly unconscious on that table, surrounded by machines, eaten alive by tubing. “And you saw this ship come into the system.”

“It tripped several of my alarms. I did not wish to be surprised by looters.” Her scornful tone made clear her opinion of the less-than-scientific scavengers known to prowl over unguarded Prothean ruins. “They met someone else here, another ship. It left. When this one did not, I grew curious. I found it as you see it.”

Alenko was stuck on something else. “You were looking for reaper artifacts?”

They’d found only a few during the *Normandy* mission, though at first they assumed they were geth. Shepard destroyed every last one, over Liara’s protests. She said they made her skin crawl. Alenko couldn’t find fault with her gut instinct, but still believed something could have been learned, in the right laboratory, with the right precautions.

Apparently Liara still felt the same. “One of several personal projects the last few years. We can’t reasonably expect to defeat the reapers, when and if they return, without knowing more about their technology. But I’ve found…” She trailed off. “I need to be quite careful with whom I share my finds. The devices have a highly adverse impact on the psyche.”

“Indoctrination.” Sovereign’s influence had destroyed Liara’s mother, and sent Shiala willingly to enslavement. It had driven Saren against every oath he took as a spectre. Nathaly rightly called it the most dangerous weapon in the galaxy.

“Precisely. Sometimes complete mental deterioration. Husks, or worse.” She seemed unperturbed, staring out into the middle distance as though her mind were chewing over a complex problem. “I’ve been in contact with your Admiral Hackett, though I suspect you know that, since you’re here.”

“Hackett’s involved?” That was news to Alenko.

Her brow furrowed. “You’re not…”

“Liara, last I heard, any mention of reapers in the navy ranks gets you a quick trip to a disciplinary counseling.” He didn’t disguise his disagreement with that policy. “This ship was making a tech delivery to a Cerberus lab that never arrived. We came to investigate.”

“Well. That explains some of the log entries.” Still, she remained troubled.

Alenko decided not to push. “What did you find?”

“They were indeed accumulating rare technology. Destined for your lab perhaps, and elsewhere.”

Alenko’s comm lit up. Nguyen. “Got something weird here.”

“Roger that.” He felt no urgency. Nguyen never sounded scared, but she’d at least be excited, if it were dangerous. “We’re on our way.”
They found Nguyen and North at the stairs down to the ship’s hold. The stairwell itself was a ruin. Bullets had chewed through the walls, and all but one of the lights were out. That sole remaining fixture fizzled and popped, making the destruction flicker in high relief. And along the floor, the metal stairs were streaked with blood. North shrank from the sight, standing as far back as the physical space of the ship allowed.

“There is worse below,” Liara stated. He almost missed her quiet horror, a constant presence whenever the Normandy stumbled over some new unexpected tragedy. This Liara was detached, clinical. The four of them headed down, North bringing up the rear.

He expected a standard cargo bay, and instead found the hold lined with benches and cabinets that wouldn’t have felt out of place in a museum’s back rooms. A body lay at the foot of the stairs where the blood trail ended, a pistol clutched in one hand. Liara nudged the woman’s cold corpse with her toe. “This was Dr. Molly Chandler. We shared research on the Protheans, years before Eden Prime. I wondered at the time why your Alliance did not call on her expertise to assist with the beacon.”

Nguyen crouched by the body and picked up the gun. “She got off a few shots. Not bad for a lab geek.”

Chandler’s lab tunic was stained with her own blood. Alenko put his rifle away as he squatted to examine the remains. Alenko could just see the gunshot wounds—very small caliber, more like an attack of flying needles than bullets. He didn’t know of any weapon like that. However, a few feet from her body, two more dead scientists lay against the cabinetry without a mark on them.

North fiddled with a microscope, still trying to avoid looking at the corpses. “They were performing research here?”

“More like cataloguing,” Liara said. “Determining which pieces of recovered technology had any value, along with their origin and function, and using the Blue Suns for protection and mobility. Whoever attacked this ship left most of the discoveries behind.”

Alenko looked up from the dead. “They ransacked the place.”

Drawers hung open, their precious contents scattered over the floor. But she appeared to be correct. Whatever the attackers sought, they weren’t interested in anything else.

Nguyen took in the sheer volume of baubles and snorted her disbelief. “Where were they getting this stuff?”

Liara hesitated. “I believe they were trading for it. They came here to rendezvous with another ship, some vessel my scanners didn’t recognize.”

“Trading?” Alenko turned his attention to her. “You think this attack was a deal gone south?”

She shook her head and started walking again. “There’s more. Back here.”

They moved further into the hold, until the clutter gave way to a berth full of a half-dozen tanks sized for an adult human. Tubes ran out of them into reservoirs and monitors. Alenko glanced inside. Each tank was empty.

North swallowed, audibly. “These are cloning tanks.”

Alenko raised his eyebrows. North cleared her throat. “Field trip in high school, to the Sirta Foundation. They had a whole warehouse of the these things. Hard to forget.”
High school for North would be a fairly recent memory. Easy to forget how young a lot of recruits were.

Liara said, “The ship’s logs indicate they were transporting several viable specimens to this rendezvous point. As far as I can tell, they are the only... objects missing from the inventory.”

“Specimens.” Alenko’s stomach turned over.

Nguyen scoffed. “It’s not like they’re people.”

Clones had few legal rights under Council law, and by convention were grown without higher brain functions, out of ethical considerations. Not that their laws had much impact in underground markets. He crossed his arms, stubborn. “Still doesn’t sit right.”

“Regardless, someone ambushed the ship and took the clones.” Liara tapped on her omni-tool and brought up a holo recording from the ship’s security system.

The three marines crowded round. Alenko frowned. “Those don’t look like mercs.”

Nguyen was more blunt. “What the hell are they?”

The creatures were bipedal, a kind of silvery-bronze color, with long, triangular-crested heads and four glowing yellow eyes. They reminded Alenko strongly of the evil alien archetype used frequently in old sci-fi vids, before humanity met any real aliens. He’d never seen any living creature like it.

They held odd rifles that looked almost like living things themselves. Alenko leaned in to inspect the image, his brow furrowing. “What kind of weapon is that?”

“I found several firearms of strange construction,” Liara said. “I took them aboard my ship for safekeeping while I continued to explore.”

“Small caliber?” he asked, playing a hunch.

“Yes. How did you-“

“Chandler was shot by a very small caliber, high speed gun.” He rubbed his neck. “Problem is, nobody in Council or Terminus space uses a weapon like that.”

Nguyen made a disgusted sound. “So after all this, we’re nowhere.”

North had continued to circle the cloning tanks, until she found a terminal. “Not nowhere. This is Nephilim’s ship, and it looks like it made deliveries to both Armageddon and Lazarus. We got our confirmation, at least. There should be more intel in the lab records.”

Liara wore a peculiarly pensive expression. After a long moment, she said, “I’ve seen technology like those guns before. Two years ago, not long after the Normandy attack.” Her mouth thinned, and she glanced up at Alenko. “It belongs to a reclusive race known as the Collectors.”

Alenko heard the word like an electric shock. We heard the Shadow Broker recovered her body, on the behalf of a race we know as Collectors, Miranda has said. They’d wanted Nathaly’s remains- or was that another lie?

“The ambush I buy,” Nguyen said. “But an entire sentient species I’ve never heard of before ambushes the ship and steals a half-dozen clones? That doesn’t sound far-fetched?”
“The exchange fits,” she continued, patiently. “They’re well known for their love of unusual genetic material. I suspect Cerberus arranged a deal with the Collectors, and one party decided not to honor it.”

Alenko was still trying to work through it. “Cerberus traded human clones to aliens, for research? That’s repulsive even for them.”

“You can’t be surprised, sir,” North said. “We’ve known Cerberus has a growing interest in biotech.”

Nguyen remained stuck on the attack. “So Cerberus offers these Collector things what they want, but they steal it instead? And don’t bother to take anything else, not even the Cerberus personnel?”


“There are several missing crew,” Liara admitted. “Mostly Blue Suns.”

A crash came from the darkness beyond the tank room. Alenko’s hand went to his pistol. Liara’s hand began to glow as she readied a biotic strike. Nguyen, naturally, already had her rifle out and pointed at the noise. North took a nervous step backwards.

Alenko glanced at her, confused, and that momentary distraction cost him.

A dozen husks rushed the tank room. Alenko hadn’t seen a husk since the end of the war. They ran just as he remembered—whipcord-thin line backers, barreling towards them with shoulders hunched and those unholy empty mouths opened in a low moan that made every hair stand on end.

The first of them struck his arm with one long-fingered hand with bruising force. Alenko stumbled sideways and tried to raise his gun. The husk’s other hand swung in a long arc and clawed at his face.

“Kaidan!” Liara yelled. A second later, her biotic throw tore the husk loose and dashed it against the bulkhead.

Alenko wiped the blood from his eyes and swept his hand in front of him. The next pair of husks floated into the air and flew over his head under their own momentum.

Nguyen held the trigger down and aimed low. A trio of husks fell to the floor as their knees exploded, dragging themselves along by their hands. Clearly, she hadn’t stood idle during the war—she knew exactly where to hit a husk. Alenko sank six shots into them and popped his thermal clip.

Meanwhile, North finally located some measure of composure. She crouched behind a tank and managed to squeeze off several shaky shots. An advancing husk fell before it could reach Liara.

Not that it would have mattered. Liara was a whirling fury of biotic destruction. Her attacks were nearly scientific—precise, calculated, but also fast and lethal. A cloud of blue energy hovered above her skin. With her left hand, she threw a warp that reduced a husk to a smoldering pile of ash, while with her other she raised a singularity that left another three bobbing helplessly in the air. Alenko threw them with his own biotics. The subsequent explosion took out an additional two.

The lone remaining husk had no mind left to be deterred by the obliteration of its fellows. It all but ran straight into Nguyen’s gun. She put it down with an expression of intense satisfaction.
A long silence followed. North panted. Alenko kept his pistol aimed at the shadows, wary, energy still gathered in his free hand. Liara straightened and brushed invisible dust from her lab coat, nearly fastiduous. “Well. I suppose we know what became of the rest of the crew after all.”

“They shouldn’t be here,” Nguyen burst out, not so much afraid as shocked. “Geth make husks. Not aliens. Not even weird-ass one that trade in clones.”

“Reapers make husks.” Alenko wasn’t sure why he bothered with the correction. The reapers weren’t here, either. Reluctantly, he let the dark energy in his fist dissipate, unable to hold it longer without consequences.

North audibly swallowed. Sweat poured down her face, her hands trembling around her pistol. Alenko’s brow furrowed.

Liara frowned, considering the remnants of the husks, which were rapidly breaking down into ash and dust. “Perhaps they were left over from the war, kept in Cerberus captivity. We found husks at the Nepheron facility two years ago.”

Alenko didn’t appreciate the reminder. Nepheron was where he met Farrell, and while it might not be Farrell’s fault his life nearly imploded in the fall of ’83, he was certainly the catalyst. And Nepheron came after Ash’s death, when his leg was still too much of a mess for combat duty. Nathaly was so deep in her head that he was afraid her guilty thoughts might eat her alive. He never thought he’d miss her shutting him out like that.

He hated that the smallest comment could still come out of nowhere and reopen his grief like a thrown knife. More than grief. It was an overwhelming fear of what Cerberus might be doing to her, even now. At the same time, he hated his relief, to still care enough to hurt and worry and miss her that much.

North ran her hand over the barrel of her pistol, hissing at the latent heat, unable to stop the compulsive gesture. “Are there more of them?”

Nguyen snickered. “What, you don’t like zombies?”

“Where are you from?” Alenko asked, realizing abruptly that he didn’t know.

“Ninhursag,” she said, after a longer pause than expected. “In the Traverse.”

Nguyen stopped laughing. Indeed, she looked ashamed, which was an entirely novel expression for Nguyen. North made a show of changing out her thermal clip, mainly to avoid meeting anyone’s eyes. Liara glanced between the three marines. “I don’t understand.”

North was maybe nineteen or twenty. Eden Prime was little more than two and half years ago. She would have lived at home, when Ninhursag was decimated. Maybe that explained the lack of college, too. Alenko looked away and cleared his throat. “It was a war. A lot of colonies got hit by geth while we were chasing Saren.”

“Of course,” she said, for want of something to say.

“I need to call this in,” Alenko said, changing the subject. “This still isn’t adding up. The Alliance will want to go over every inch of this ship.”

“And you’ll want copies of those logs.” Liara seemed glad of the prospect of leaving the hold. “I’ll give you the weapons I found. It will save me a trip and allow me to resume my other work.”
“And what work is that?” he asked as they started making their way back towards the stairs. Liara didn’t sound like she was referring to archaeology. Nguyen kept her eyes fixed over her shoulder, as if waiting for another batch of husks to materialize. North couldn’t get the hold behind her fast enough.

Liara’s eyes slid to Alenko and there was something very complicated in their blue depths. “I’m looking for someone.”

“And searching for reaper artifacts for Hackett?”

“Am I allowed only one interest at a time?” She turned her gaze back ahead.

Alenko wasn’t the most socially adept, but he could detect when somebody didn’t want to talk. Instead, he concentrated on radioing Velasquez. He explained the situation and got her to relay it back to HQ. Then he dropped his hand from the comm buried in his ear, and looked at his crew. “North, I want you to start looking through the computers, see if you can piece more of this together. Nguyen, you’re on watch in case any other hostiles show up.”

He avoided the word husks, not wanting to set North off again. Nguyen nodded. “And you’ll be?”

“I’m going with Liara to her flitter.”

“Yes, sir,” said North, as they reached the stairs. Nguyen snorted to herself but made no further comment.

They parted ways, Liara leading Alenko to a smaller access port closer to her ship. They sealed their suits and climbed up along her magnetic cable to reach the vehicle. Once they were secure, she shut the hatch and began re-pressurizing the tiny cabin. The flitter was utilitarian even by military standards. Alenko couldn’t imagine spending weeks of travel time here, even by himself. There wasn’t so much as a cot. A bedroll lay neatly rolled under the bare metal seats.

There was, however, a huge concentration of computing equipment, hung from every bulkhead and littering every surface with cabling. For data processing, he supposed, though it seemed like overkill to his trained eye.

“This ship is yours?” he asked, as they removed their helmets.

“I bought it two months ago.” She gave it a spare glance. “It’s not much, but it’s good to have independent mobility. Chartering is expensive and they ask too many questions.”

“Liara, what are you really doing here?”

“I told you.”

“I mean the other thing.”

She sighed, and sat back in the pilot’s couch. “About a month after we left Alchera a friend and I ran afoul of the Shadow Broker. Well, he wasn’t a friend when it started, but… the situation changed.”

“What in the hell were you doing messing with the Broker?” He was actually shocked. Everyone knew dealings with the Shadow Broker were often deadly, and even when they weren’t, they always cost more than you thought you were paying. And Liara was… not exactly a wide-eyed academic, not anymore, but it was still impossible to imagine her successfully engaging in intrigue on her own.
“I had questions. About what happened to us. What happened to Shepard.” She looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap. “Nobody else offered any answers.”

He licked his lips, moved some of the cabling aside, and sank into the couch beside hers. “You asked him about the ship that attacked the Normandy.”

Liara shook her head. “I never got that far.”

Alenko couldn’t quite hide his disappointment. She looked up at him, meeting his eyes with a rare vulnerability. “I never got over it. I’m sorry. That might not be a welcome admission, but I couldn’t let it go.”

“Me neither.” He cleared his throat, shifted his gaze away. “I hung onto it in different ways, maybe, but… It’s not something you can just pack away and forget.”

They sat in silence for several seconds before Liara’s need to speak overcame her tact. “I couldn’t stop thinking about Shepard. We left her there. When we were rescued, I did not expect to find her alive, but I never dreamed the Alliance would leave her body. It felt wrong. I wanted— I needed — I needed to know she was alright. Not just… vanished. Not left to burn and freeze like a piece of space garbage.”

His hand balled into a fist in his lap without any conscious impulse. He stared at the floor. There was a lot he could have said. In their own way, Nathaly and Liara were as close as she was to him. He wasn’t the type to be jealous of a friendship and never resented it. But after her death, whenever Liara tried to reach out, commiserate, he ignored her more often than he responded. He couldn’t cope with her grief on top of his own. He still wasn’t sure he could.

But it felt selfish to not even try, not after all this time, not when Liara’s wounds remained as raw as his own. Alenko licked his lips. “I had this nightmare, almost every night for six months after we got home. I’m up in the shuttle with Joker, nosing through the wreckage, looking for that damn antenna. Only in the dream we’re searching for Nathaly. Hour after hour, getting colder, running out of air… But I can’t find her. I can hear her sometimes, calling out in the static of a radio, but she’s just…”

“Gone,” Liara said again, when it was clear he wasn’t going to speak.

He sat up a bit, covering the tightness in his throat with a touch of gruffness. “I had it again last night. First time in a while.”

“You weren’t very surprised to see me.”

“No,” he reflected. “It felt like something was stirring, when I woke up. An itch at the back of my neck.”

“Strong biotics can be more sensitive to such things, at least among asari.” Liara looked over at him. “My mission was a disaster.”

There was no decent reply to that. So instead, he said, lamely, “I’m sorry I didn’t write more.”

“I understand.” Forgiveness, if not acceptance. “I suppose I only wanted to correct the navy’s oversight. Leaving her was a desecration, but returning came at a high price. We found the Broker’s agents picking over the wreckage. The resulting altercation led to Omega, and they took my friend. I haven’t found any trace of him since.”

“But you found Nathaly.” It slipped out before he could think better of it. Every awful piece was
falling into place, even the boldfaced omission of what the Broker’s people wanted with the wreckage, to either hide what Liara had done with Nathaly, or spare his feelings. He’d always wondered how Cerberus got her remains. The site of the wreckage wasn’t widely advertised.

There was a long moment where Liara seemed to not even breathe. She was so stone-still that his eyes slid to the front port, following her thousand-yard-stare, wondering if she’d glimpsed something. He saw nothing but the stars. “Liara, what—"

“Yes, I found her.” Her eyes cut to him. “How did you know?”

It was his turn to sit stricken and silent. With some difficulty, he drew a shaky breath. “Because Cerberus brought me to Lazarus Station. Five months ago.”

“Goddess.” Her face crumpled. She reached for his hand. “Kaidan, I never thought—"

“No, you didn’t.” He slid his hand away from her touch. “What in the hell were you doing?”

“If there was any chance to bring her back, we had to try.”

“She never wanted that.” His voice rose, all the way to a shout, despite his best efforts at calm. “How could you leave her with them? Knowing what they’d do?”

Alenko never shouted. Liara recoiled. “I was hardly replete with options. Would you have preferred the mercies of the Shadow Broker? He wanted to sell her to the Collectors.”

“That’s when you saw their guns.” Alenko sat back, disgusted. “Figuring out where to sell off Nathaly.”

Her eyes went very cold. Her mouth twisted. “How dare you.”

She might as well have slapped him. He glanced at her, and then away again. Folded his arms. Cleared his throat. But he didn’t apologize.

Liara took a steadying breath. “It wasn’t like that. You know it wasn’t. At first, I simply wanted to lay her to rest. Then I needed to keep her away from people who would truly defile her. That left Cerberus.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. He didn’t dare look at her. Because he’d left her with them, too, among their enemies, for not dissimilar reasons. He couldn’t bring himself to stop her so-called treatment, and he couldn’t make himself serve Cerberus.

After a long moment, Liara asked, tentative, “Have you heard anything about her recently? I used to get the occasional message, but lately…”

He shook his head curtly, no. “I was only there the once. Cerberus didn’t invite me out of the kindness of their heart. It was a recruitment offer. Refusal didn’t come with status updates.”

Her face fell. “Oh, Kaidan.”

“I’ve tried, you know.” He ran his hand backwards over his hair, stared out the port. “I tried to find the station afterwards. Combed every inch of intel I could lay hands on, every report, every database, for new information about Lazarus. Sometimes I feel like I must have dreamed it because there’s nothing there. It’s like she died all over again.”

She started to speak, but he ran right over her. “That’s why we’re out here. My team doesn’t know what Lazarus is, but we’ve been looking for that cell since before I knew about Nathaly, and this
ship made deliveries to her doctors. Not that it’ll help. We’re never going to find them.”

“Kaidan,” she said, and he finally stopped talking, staring down into his lap.

Liara reached across the cabin and touched his face. Made him look at her. “I’ll find them.”

Her expression was solid determination. He didn’t want to hold her gaze, but couldn’t look away. His voice half-broke. “Liara—”

“I’ve been there several times,” she said, firm as bedrock, as binding as a promise. “And I have sources you don’t. I’ll find Lazarus Station and we’ll go there together.”

His radio spared him further embarrassment. Velasquez. “Commander, we’ve got orders to secure the Collector tech and back off from the transport.”

He raised his fingers to his ear to reply, grateful. He didn’t think he could have answered Liara without completely breaking down. “We’re keeping watch until the clean-up crew arrives?”

“Yes.” She did not sound happy. “We’re going to be out here another three to five days.”

“Fantastic.” He sighed, and cut the comm. “I’ve got to get back.”

“I’ll drop you off.” Liara reached for the controls. “Those weapons are stowed under the floor panels in the back. And Kaidan?”

“What?” he asked, already half out of his seat.

Her eyes were very troubled. “Cerberus fought the Collectors for Shepard’s body. Why are they cutting deals with them now?”

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Eight days later, Alenko found himself facing another ugly debriefing with Colonel Cook. While Cook wasn’t any friendlier, he did seem less annoyed. Intel had scampered through the ship like kids in a candy shop- they didn’t stumble over a wealth of alien tech every day. Their gratitude went a long way to improving Cook’s mood. “So the ship was there.”

“Yes, sir.” He folded his hands behind his back. His face itched like crazy— the husk’s scratches couldn’t heal fast enough. “The intel we extracted from the last few raids was good.”

“But you didn’t find any sign of Project Lazarus.”

“No. But the onboard logs confirmed Nephilim Cell is real, and they’re collecting alien technology for Cerberus.” North had spent their wait collating every bit of data she downloaded before Command shut them down. “And we’ve got a new player on the field.”

“These Collectors.” Cook clearly hadn’t heard of them either. “They’re selling to Cerberus?”

“In exchange for human clones,” Alenko confirmed. “The Collectors were supposed to provide Cerberus with coordinates to a new site of Prothean ruins. Obviously, that didn’t happen.”

The scavenged Collector weaponry sat on Cook’s desk alongside Alenko’s latest report. The guns were noticeably bizarre, partially organic, and rather than shaving bullets off an ammo block, it produced enameled needles from somewhere in its depths. Even its cooling mechanism was unrecognizable.
Cook gave it a quarter turn, baffled. “Why?”

“Whatever else they’ve done, Cerberus has always aimed to give humanity, as represented by
themselves, an edge. Obscure alien inventions fit the bill. Maybe they wanted to modify them, or
dissect the technology to reverse-engineer it.”

“But I can’t begin to guess what any of this might accomplish.” Cook folded his hands on the
desk. His bald pate shone in the sterile office light, but the eyes beneath it were dark and hard.
“Do you think this hold full of alien tech had anything to do with the Cerberus personnel dead
without obvious cause? An accident of some kind?”

“I couldn’t say.” Alenko shrugged. “Nephilim Cell might be Cerberus’ exploratory arm. Feeding
new discoveries to their labs.”

Cook didn’t buy it. “They’re going to all this expense for a few shots in the dark?”

“Because Alliance R&D never funds a dead-end project.” Alenko held his temper. “If Cerberus
has some larger objective, we haven’t seen it yet.”

“I see.” Cook frowned, and pushed the guns towards him, and an OSD. “I understand we found
another highly encrypted database aboard the ship.”

“We have Private North to thank for that, sir.”

He sniffed at that, dismissive. “See what you can make of all this.”

He nodded to the materials. Alenko collected them, a little surprised to get any of it back. Intel no
doubt wanted their own shot. Cook picked up his datapad. “Thank you, Commander. You are
discharged.”

Alenko hesitated. He didn’t want to spoil Cook’s mood, but didn’t think he could let the larger
point go. “With your permission, sir, I’m more concerned about Cerberus trading with the
Collectors than their technology acquisitions.”

“They can trade in clones all they like. It’s not even illegal, provided they followed proper
conventions.”

“You don’t worry about the wider implications?” Alenko was appalled. “You’re not wondering
why the Collectors would want clones in the first place?”

“What little we know about the Collectors indicates they value interesting genetic samples. And
what they do or don’t get up to is beyond the scope of this office. The Collectors are a purely
Terminus problem.” He made it clear the subject was closed.

Alenko saluted, grudgingly acknowledged by Cook, and left the office. Maybe Cook wasn’t
interested in Collector dealings, but it was directly related to whatever Cerberus wanted with
Nathaly. Alenko fully intended to find out.
July 2185

The first morning of her new life, as Shepard finished a cold breakfast in her bunk, the station VI alerted her to a delivery. She found a black tank top along with an equally unobjectionable pair of khakis waiting outside her hatch. Piled with them were a bra, underwear, socks, and combat boots. Everything was just her size. Shepard realized she should be grateful for clothes that fit, but instead, it was another unwelcome reminder of how familiar Cerberus was with her anatomy.

As she was fastening her pants, the VI flashed the lights in her cabin. “Operatives Lawson and Taylor are waiting for you by your shuttle.”

“I don’t know how to find the dock.”

The VI sounded expensive, its voice a near-perfect recreation of a human woman, courteous with a hint of soothing. Because of course the Illusive Man would have a female VI. “Please follow the illuminated signs. Begin by turning left into the hallway.”

Shepard followed the VI’s lit path until she arrived in the docking bay. It was small. Minuteman Station wasn’t a large habitat, but it had a good sense of space, high ceilings and more of those giant windows. She hadn’t noticed much of it last night.

Miranda stood at a terminal near the shuttle, turning as she approached. “Good morning, Shepard.”

She was perfectly pleasant. Shepard never believed for a second yesterday’s confrontations were forgotten, but she was a professional, and obviously considered a faintly spikey brand of charm to be one of her assets.

Jacob stood nearby, with his arms crossed as he looked out the port. “Commander.”

He seemed genuinely glad to see her. That put her more off-balance than all of Miranda’s false politeness. She laced her hands behind her back. “When are we leaving?”

“Right to the point.” Miranda’s smile might have been pleased. Every expression was such an artful construct that she became hard to read. “Shortly. Freedom’s Progress is one relay from here. We’ll be there about four hours after we depart.”

Travel between relays was instantaneous, but intrasystem transport was not. Nor could they move at top speed, as they could in interstellar space—the interplanetary medium was far denser, and the magnetic fields of stars had odd effects on drive cores. Shepard nodded. “Your boss implied the pair of you are my support. I assume that won’t be an issue.”

“Not at all.” Jacob was actually excited. “I look forward to it.”

She turned to Miranda. She gave her a very jaded look. “The Illusive Man’s very impressed with you. I’m eager to see if you can live up to his expectations.”

“Miranda.” Jacob sighed her name like he’d done it a thousand times before.

Shepard was unfazed, if a little surprised that the Illusive Man took a positive view of their meeting. “Are you going to have a problem following my orders?”
“I know who I report to.” Her tone made it plain that person wasn’t Shepard. “Don’t do anything that betrays Cerberus, and we’ll be fine.”

“For someone who invested years of her life into putting me back together, you’re not too fond of me.” The comment was a light barb. Shepard watched her reaction.

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t need a friend. And I didn’t ask for that assignment.”

“I thought you were in charge?”

She made a sound in her throat, somewhere between disgust and exasperation. “I wasn’t in charge. The Illusive Man called the shots. We didn’t always agree.”

Jacob buried his face in his hand. Shepard’s mouth turned up at the corner. “Give me an example.”

“I wanted to implant you with a control chip. To protect our investment. But he wouldn’t allow it, out of concern that it would alter your personality in some way.” She shook her head as though remembering an old argument, one she’d lost and was still bitter over.

The smirk dropped off Shepard’s face.

“I’m almost always right.” Miranda brushed imaginary dirt from the front of her tight-fit uniform and looked up at Shepard plainly. “The Illusive Man is taking an incredible risk with you. I just hope you’re worth it.”

She stalked off to see to the shuttle. Her boots had a thick heel, and they clicked against the floor as she departed, an echo of her presence to fill the silence she left behind.

“I really hate that woman,” Shepard said.

“She’s not that bad.” Jacob paused. “You just have to get to know her.”

“I don’t need to get to know her. She tries anything on the mission, and she’ll wish she hadn’t.” She jerked her chin at him. “What about you? Repressing any deep-seated resentment against me you’d like to air before we risk our lives together?”

“No.” He bit his lip. “I know most of the Alliances hates Cerberus on general principal. And I get why. But I’m glad you’re giving us a chance.”

She would be cold in the ground before she gave Cerberus a chance. Recent, involuntary events only serving to prove that point. “I’m not doing anything but investigating a colony. That’s it.”

“Still don’t trust the boss, huh.” He had a chuckle that came from deep in his chest. “Do you trust me?”

Her first instinct was no, but she realized almost as quickly it wasn’t exactly true. Jacob wasn’t Cerberus rank-and-file. He got her away from the station. Sure, she did her share, but she wasn’t in a good place during the attack. On her own, it might have ended very differently. She hesitated. “I’m still making up my mind about you.”

“I’ll take it.” He sat back on his heel and grinned.

Shepard glanced around the port, and hung her thumbs in her pockets. “Why in the hell did you join Cerberus, anyway? The navy wasn’t good enough for you?”
“Enlisting wasn’t my first choice. My family didn’t have much after my dad... I thought I could earn a paycheck and make a difference.” He shook his head. “The navy’s drowning in red tape. So much of what I did as a marine seemed pointless. Same old bullshit, different leaders, even after Eden Prime and saving the Citadel.”

“Nobody likes the hurry up and wait. Doesn’t mean we don’t do anything.”

“I really expected things to change after the war.” Jacob made a sound of disgust. “Cerberus is different. When colonies go missing, we don’t commission a report. We find out what’s going on, and we stop it.”

“Where’s the accountability? All that red tape protects the people we serve as much as it protects the Alliance. Cerberus hurts as many people as they help.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“I imagine my disappointment. I don’t know how I’ll live with myself.” She crossed her arms. Jacob stared at her. She stared back, evenly, daring him to say something.

“I really didn’t know they set up Akuze,” he said. “I can’t imagine that was an approved op.”

“I can’t imagine that it wasn’t.” Shepard shrugged, noting how it was suddenly they rather than we. “You work for Cerberus, Taylor, but it’s worth considering that I might know them better than you.”

“We’re all set,” Miranda called. Jacob’s frown deepened, but he let the subject drop.

“I’m not,” Shepard said as they approached the shuttle. “This is a potential combat situation. I need arms and a hardsuit.”

“Right, I’d almost forgotten.” Miranda nodded towards a cargo pallet. “We had a suit made up for you in anticipation of your waking. It’s the same type used by Alliance spec ops currently. There’s better tech available, but given how much you care about your clothes, I’d say it was the right choice.”

Shepard rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and you walk around in a cat suit and high heel boots for your own comfort. You understood my objection perfectly.”

“I use all the tools available to me.” She seemed more amused than offended. “There’s a whole armory in there as well. We had a bit of a technological paradigm shift while you were out. It was hard to guess what you’d prefer.”

“You’re telling me everything is like that ridiculous excuse for a pistol?” Shepard was aghast. “Disposable heat sinks?”

Jacob shrugged. “They fire more rapidly and chew through shields like butter. Based on geth technology.”

“You know how many soldiers throughout history would’ve killed for infinite ammunition? You threw that away?”

“It’s not ammo—”

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Just show me what you have.”
Twenty minutes later she was decently kitted out and ready to go. She liked the stability of the rifle, an ERCS design, though the pouch full of thermal clips hanging off her utility belt continued to weigh on her mind. Surely somebody out there still made real guns.

They boarded the shuttle. Miranda issued a series of quiet orders to the pilot, and soon thereafter, they left the dock. Shepard took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She would go to Freedom’s Progress, see what happened, and figure out what to do with that information. Part of her already argued the obvious next move was taking her intelligence straight back to Arcturus. She was disturbed by the part that told her to wait.

The first hour was silent. Jacob stared out the port. Miranda tapped away at her datapad, busy at work. Shepard watched the both of them.

Miranda was so calm, so composed, that it made Shepard want to hit her. The words what did you do to me formed on her lips, but she said, “Do we know anything about what happened to these people, or what we expect to find on the ground? The Illusive Man was vague.”

And if that wasn’t the most pretentious name she’d ever heard, she’d eat her socks. It felt slimy in her mouth. She needed something else to call him.

“We’re not sure,” Jacob said. “We got to the other colonies after official investigators. Sometimes after looters, too. Never found anything—no bodies, no signs of attack, not even any unusual genetic material to hint at the attackers.”

“And you think this time will be different because we’ll beat them to it?”

“That’s the idea.” He settled back. “Orders?”

Shepard watched Miranda cringe at the word. “We’re looking for any clues about who did this. Stay sharp.”

Miranda barely glanced up from her datapad. “Understood.”

Jacob smiled broadly. “Then it’ll be time for some payback.”

Ash’s face flickered through her mind. That was her exact attitude towards everything— the geth, Sovereign, Saren, it didn’t matter. She had so much latent anger in her that Shepard half-expected her to go nova. Right up until she died.

Shepard shook her head to clear it. “I still don’t know what’s going on. It’s too soon to talk about revenge.”

Her squad exchanged a glance. Shepard folded her arms and ignored it.

They were coming up on the mass relay. It loomed beyond the port, too close now to make out much more than the white annulus filled by a gigantic, rotating cloud of blue, the mass effect field that would transport them instantaneously to their destination system. It swung out of view as the shuttle maneuvered into alignment.

Shepard had always been fascinated by the process. It didn’t matter how many hundreds of times she traversed the relay system; it never got old. She shifted to the other side of the spacecraft to watch, as Miranda began a discussion of logistics.

They raced down the length of the relay. A tongue of blue leapt out from the field and touched their shuttle. The moment it contacted their hull, Shepard’s head gave a great pulse, consumed by
such extraordinary pressure that for a second, she couldn’t see. It was as though her brain was trying to push apart her bones, throbbing in time with the relay’s spin, wave after wave of aching pressure liquefying her mind.

“—not to expect survivors, but what are our priorities?” Miranda looked up as her question lingered, unanswered, several seconds. “Commander?”

Shepard’s hands were twisted in her hair, pressed tight to her skull like they were trying to hold it together, her face scrunched up. Her stomach lurched as she came back to herself. Then it took a conscious effort to relax her muscles. She blinked the dots from her eyes and reached for whatever composure she could find, licking her lips with a sandpaper tongue. “Yes. What?”

Her squad stared. Outside, the new relay rapidly receded as the shuttle pilot set a course for Freedom’s Progress. Shepard sharpened her expression into a glare and repeated the question, daring them to answer. “What?”

Jacob frowned, but his courage failed him. He returned to the original subject. “What should we do if we find any survivors?”

She sank back against the couch, disappointed and irritated beyond all measure. “It’s ridiculous that you felt the need to ask me that question. But if it fucking helps, I bet a survivor could tell us plenty about what happened.”

Nobody attempted conversation the remainder of their journey. Shepard tried not to dwell on Cerberus, or her strange reaction to the relay transit, focusing on the mission ahead. Her head felt like the tail end of a bad hangover.

They set down near a cluster of white pre-fab habitats in the center of the city. Shepard recognized the kind. Though years changed the design aesthetic in small but noticeable ways, the base hab unit remained the same. They were white, squat and rectangular, pierced by two or three hatches and subtly divided into several rooms. Infinitely configurable, communities could build homes, businesses, schools, and labs according to their means and needs. Shepard spent plenty of time as a child in that kind of place. Temporary, while a colony got its feet under itself, crowded and lacking in privacy. Cheap.

The paint was already coming off the habs at Freedom’s Progress. She peeled away a long flake with her gloved fingers, and smiled at it, the first familiar thing she’d seen since waking up.

Miranda didn’t share her nostalgia. “What a crap hole.”

Jacob rolled his shoulder. Snow drifted down, light as cobweb, and stuck briefly to his suit. “Kind of creeps me out. There’s nobody here.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” Shepard said. Overhead the sky was space-black in defiance of the breathable atmosphere. She shivered a bit in the late winter breeze. The planet’s largest moon filled a quarter of the sky, the thin wash of moonshine illuminating the buildings in harsh lines of light and shadow. The place had an eerie feel. A lifetime ago, she asked Tali if a place could have a soul, and Tali responded yes— otherwise why could it feel abandoned when it was only empty?

Freedom’s Progress was abandoned.

They entered the nearest hab and found a long-cold dinner laid out at the table. Not a chair was out of place. Shepard brushed her hand across the forgotten flatware, the folds of a napkin set aside next to a plate, the solidified mash potatoes piled on the dish. A bottle of ketchup sat near one of
the places. She picked it up and turned it over in her palm.

Miranda gave it a look of disgust. “Who eats mashed potatoes with ketchup?”


Miranda’s porcelain face colored. She didn’t even have the grace to flush red; her blush was a rosy tincture spreading over her cheekbones, if anything making her even lovelier than before. It reminded Shepard too much of her mother, and that thought was one part reflexive guilt at realizing this was the first time in two days she’d thought of her at all, and one part old jealousy. Very little ever ruffled Hannah Shepard, and her temperamental daughter had endured that unflappable quality her whole life.

She glowered at Miranda. Jacob attempted to lighten the mood. “I doubt Miranda’s ever eaten ketchup with anything.”

It backfired. Miranda turned her glare on him instead. Jacob stepped smartly to the side, so that Shepard was between them. She set the bottle down. “Keep moving. We’ve barely started.”

As they progressed through the colony, the sense of wrongness grew. Shepard expected some sign of human beings, survivors come in from the outskirts, bodies, or at least evidence of violence. Surely the earlier reports were exaggerations. Surely somebody fought back. Surely somebody managed to hide, at least. But nothing in Freedom’s Progress was the least bit disturbed. She wished Liara were here; this was exactly the kind of mystery she might be able to piece together into sense.

If Liara still lived. Shepard never saw her when the ship was going down. The hatch to med bay and her lab had been clogged with debris.

They emerged from a hab into a small courtyard made of sheet metal flooring framed by a utilitarian pipe railing. Three sets of stairs from the surrounding homes poured into the patio. It was more of a backyard than Shepard ever had, growing up. A few empty flowerpots stood beside the stoop waiting for spring. A tricycle graced another.

Snow fell gently, a few flakes at a time. Only a sparse accumulation dusted the ground. Shepard held out her hand and watched one melt in her gloved palm, recalling her first experience of snow on Noveria. It was good memory— one of her best. With the slightest effort of will, she could feel the blizzard bearing down, the wind singing and laughing in their ears. It threatened to toss her over the edge. Kaidan put his hand on the small of her back, to steady her. She could feel the warmth all the way through her parka…

A flicker of motion in the corner of her eye evaporated the memory like the snow on her glove. “Drone turret!”

She dove for the railing. The turret rose onto the roof and braced itself on three legs before it opened fire. Little more than a flying gun protected by a mass effect field, the turrets were cheap autonomous defenses used widely in colonial space. Their software was just as cheap. It had difficulty finding a firing solution on a soldier crouched in cover, even such thin awful cover as this.

Shepard popped out over the barricade, grateful for her shield after yesterday’s antics, and nailed it with a burst of fire to bring down its protections. Across from her, Jacob and Miranda had both prepared biotic attacks. They launched them in tandem. Something about how they moved suggested more than coincidence. They’d worked together before, with more than average ease.
The attacks combined destructively and the resulting explosion shattered the turret.

For a moment, Shepard’s head buzzed so loudly she could feel her brain vibrating, jelly in a pan, obliterating all other thoughts. Her eyes winced shut.

“Something wrong?” Miranda asked, rising.

She rubbed her forehead, still twinging. “No.”

The sensation wasn’t completely unfamiliar. She had echoes of it, before she— before the Normandy attack, whenever Liara or Kaidan used their biotics and near the relay memorial on the Citadel. Never that strong. Shepard was more rattled than she let on. She tried to remember if it felt like that back on Lazarus Station, but her memories were too muddled by other circumstances.

Shepard pushed herself to standing and all but growled. Goddamn, but she shouldn’t be feeling it already. “Keep moving. We still haven’t found anything.”

“The defenses shouldn’t be hostile,” Jacob said as they left the patio. “They should know a few human guests aren’t a threat.”

“This is the second time in as many days that I’ve been attacked by suspiciously hostile mechs,” Shepard said.

Miranda shook her head, dismissive. “They’re not related.”

“How do you know?”

Miranda checked her gun. Shepard rounded on her. “Is there something you’re not telling me about Wilson?”

“Quiet,” Jacob said, holding up his hand. “I heard something.”

Indeed, there were low voices coming from the hab ahead of them. Shepard pushed past the Cerberus operatives and listened a moment, but couldn’t make anything out. She readied her rifle and tagged the hatch.

Four quarians were in the middle of an argument. The instant the hatch opened, three grabbed their guns and stepped forward. “Stop right there!”

The fourth quarian rushed forward and shoved him back. “Prazza! You said you’d let me handle this.”

She turned her head towards the humans. She paused, irritation giving way to confusion. “Wait… Shepard?”

Shepard blinked and lowered her rifle. “Tali’Zorah?”

She was dressed differently from how Shepard last saw her, and with quarians, the envirosuit masked most other physical identifiers. Tali’s was a new model, decorated with purple glass and patterned fabric edged in silver-gray. But despite the mechanical filtration of the suit, Shepard would recognize her voice, and that shy, hesitating stance, just about anywhere.

Behind Tali, the aggressive quarian, Prazza, raised his rifle in defiance. “I’m not taking chances with Cerberus operatives.”

Shepard grimaced. Clearly, her squad’s branded attire had not gone unnoticed.
“Put those weapons down!” Tali actually put her hand on top of the gun and forced it towards the floor. She turned back to Shepard. “Is that… You’re alive?”

Shepard’s shock was wearing off. She let out a breath, her shoulders almost sagging under the sudden relief of meeting a friend. This was all starting to feel like a bizarre nightmare. Tali was a grounding point. “God, I’m glad to see you.”

Prazza took another threatening step. Tali pushed her palm against his chest to halt him. “Prazza, tell your team to put their weapons away!”

For a second, it seemed as though he might disobey. Then he holstered the rifle on his back with evident disdain. The remaining pair of quarians followed suit. “ Damn it, Tali. This is bullshit! Why would your old commander work for Cerberus?”

“I— I don’t know.” Tali’s sense of surprise was still going strong. She floundered after the words. “I don’t know. If this is really— Shepard would have a reason.”

Shepard didn’t have a reason. Not a good one, anyway. She licked her lips. “Cerberus rebuilt me after I… after what happened. I was asleep a long time.”

“And now you’re working for them?” There was an element of distress in Tali’s voice that Shepard couldn’t follow. She was wringing her hands, all but pacing in place.

“I’m not taking their orders,” Shepard said, firm on that one point. “Why are you here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” She tugged at her hood. “One of our people, Veetor, was here on pilgrimage. After the colony went offline, we came to look for him.”

“How do you know he survived?”

“We saw him when we landed. We haven’t been able to get to him through the mechs.”

Prazza spoke up. “He ran for the security station. He looked injured. Damage to the suit plus an infection, and he’s probably delirious.”

“Not to mention whatever trauma he experienced living through this attack,” Tali added. “He’s probably trying to defend himself.”

_She woke up on the table by herself, an IV snaking out of her arm. A mech burst into her room and shot at her._ Shepard cleared her throat. “You think he reprogrammed the mechs?”

Tali and Prazza nodded. Shepard glanced between the two squads. “Then we should work together to find him. He’s the only witness.”

“Good idea,” Tali said.

Prazza crossed his arms, disgusted. “Now we’re working for Cerberus?”

Tali finally had enough. “No, you’re working for me. If you can’t follow orders, go wait on the ship.”

He grumbled something dark under his breath. Shepard turned her eyes from Prazza to Tali. “What happened while I was gone?”

The circular beacon mounted on Tali’s mask just below where Shepard presumed her mouth to be lit up, indicating the beginning of speech, but Prazza beat her to it. His tone was very bitter.
“They killed our people, infiltrated the flotilla, and tried to blow up one of our ships.”

Miranda shifted, putting her hand on her hip, all dismissive condescension. “That’s not how I’d explain it, exactly. It was nothing personal.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “I guess it wasn’t personal when the geth attacked Eden Prime either. They only wanted the beacon, right?”

“We can argue over who killed who later,” Jacob interjected. “Right now, we’re trying to help get these colonists back home.”

Tali nodded. “We’ll circle around and draw off some of the drones while you head straight down the center to security. We’ll regroup there.”

“Sounds good.” Shepard couldn’t believe how much easier she felt, working this out with Tali rather than Miranda. “See you on the far side.”

They synced comms, and the quarians departed. Miranda fixed her with a jaded glare as she walked towards the hatch. Shepard found she didn’t care. Tali was here. Somebody she could count on. Somebody who could answer the questions lingering unspoken in her mind, once this was over. She clung to that like a lighthouse on a foggy night.

They encountered several more packs of drones and mechs as they wound their way to the far side of the colony, where colony security was located. The quarians found trouble of their own. Prazza and his comrades were annoyed with Tali, and reluctant to follow her orders, to Tali’s increasing frustration. Shepard sympathized. Jacob just wanted to shoot things, and Miranda seemed thoroughly unimpressed. Shepard doubted anything had ever impressed Miranda, not once in her whole life. She had that kind of air. Jacob’s comment about the ketchup was a joke hinting at a privileged upbringing that undoubtedly taught her to dismiss anyone lacking that same polished status. It gave Shepard an urge to bloody her nose, put a little life on that face.

Every part of Shepard’s body felt wrong. The nagging aches of yesterday were fading, and she was good at compartmentalizing pain anyhow. It was the sheer *strangeness* of her every movement that ruined her concentration. Her arm raised her gun, but a fraction faster than expected, the limb feeling ever-so-slightly heavier hanging off her shoulder. The way her feet struck the metal walkways at not quite the right stride. How her heart felt dense and hard within her chest and her brain vibrated like a struck bell every time her companions deployed a biotic field. Constant, tiny reminders of Cerberus’ unquantified overhaul, as pervasive in their own way as the orange cybernetics crisscrossing her skin.

Tali spoke through the comm. “Shepard, Prazza and the others rushed on ahead. I think they’re trying to beat you to Veetor. There’s a heavy mech by the security station. It’s going to tear them to pieces!”

“I’m on it.” She jerked her head towards her team. “Stay in cover and spread out. These mechs are cheap. Give the heavy enough targets, it’ll get confused.”

“Copy that.” Jacob popped in a fresh thermal clip.

Miranda gave her a curt nod. Shepard hoped like hell she was still right about the mechs, two years out of date.

She tagged open a large bay door leading to a cargo loading station in front of security. Boxes stacked five meters high scattered the yard. A pair of quarians lay groaning on the dirt, their suits
badly damaged. Further back stood the mech. Tall, broad-shouldered, and equipped with both standard artillery and rockets built into its arms, it was well-suited for defending the colony’s most valuable assets.

One heavy foot was planted on the back of an unmoving quarian woman. Shepard couldn’t see Tali anywhere.

It raised its arm and shot a rocket at her.

Shepard dove out of the way and rolled into position behind a shipping container. The rocket dislodged a large chunk of white hab wall. Risking that it still took time to recycle the rocket, as in her previous life, she leaned out and sent several bursts of fire into the mech. They smacked against a shield with a tell-tale warble.

It took three steps towards her and showered her position in rapid-pulse machine gun spray.

Her own shields took several rounds before she got out of the line of fire, but they held. Across the field she saw Miranda crouched with her omni-tool open, her fingers flying over the interface.

Jacob had taken cover in one of the two smaller habs flanking the yard, forming a quadrant with the security station and the entryway. He shot at the mech with a high-caliber pistol, distracting it from Shepard. She laid into the mech with everything her rifle had. He was right about one thing — the rate of fire was dramatically increased from the older models.

Something in the mech exploded in a cascade of blue sparks. “Shield’s down!” Miranda called, sending a biotic attack careening into the mech. It rocked back on its feet.

Shepard adjusted her aim, no longer wanting to simply wear out the shield, but hit where it counted. Her gun took out the shoulder joint. It fired a rocket almost straight into the earth, as its arm failed to respond to its commands.

Jacob aimed for its head. He only dented the metal before the mech fired on him with its other weapon and forced him into cover.

Miranda peppered it with her submachine gun. Shepard had never liked the things, relatively underpowered for their weight, and finicky to maintain. But it was exactly the kind of fussy weapon someone like Miranda would like. Shepard was forced to admit she knew how to use it. Smoke began to pour from the joints of the mech.

As it turned towards Miranda, Shepard took aim one last time, driving her hail of bullets directly into its back. There was a sharp whine— a warning— and then the mech exploded.

She ducked down, tucking her head to her chest automatically, as pieces of the mech rained down all around them. Her ears rang. There was a noxious stench on the air. Whatever chemicals kept the great machine in operation, she supposed.

But it left her with a lingering, nagging feeling, a sense of something profoundly wrong about the scene, that she couldn’t put her finger on. So instead, she sauntered over to Miranda, who was now standing by the security station access, frowning at the hatch.

“Door’s locked.” She pursed her lips. “It could take a while.”

“Better get started then.”

She looked at Shepard’s impassive face, sighed, and yelled for Jacob to come assist her.
Tali entered the yard, and immediately ran to the nearest quarian, flipping him over on his back. Shepard went to help. “Is his suit breached?”

“Yes.” Tali’s voice was tight, worried. “There’s a shipping office in one of these habs. They should have a first aid kit.”

“I got him,” Shepard said, hefting the injured man into a fireman’s carry, belatedly noting it was Prazza. “You get the other one.”

“Right.” Tali hurried across the yard, towards the obliterated mech.

The office was in the portside hab. Shepard laid Prazza on the floor with as much delicacy as she could muster, and retrieved some medi-gel from the kit. He had several bullet wounds. Shepard knew nothing of quarian anatomy— few did, given how they were forced to remain within their envirosuits at all times— but figured they’d bleed out as easily as the next species. She packed the wounds with practiced efficiency until they stopped leaking blood.

Tali dragged in the other surviving quarian. Shepard could tell by the hunch of her shoulders that the third was, as she suspected, no longer living.

“Miranda’s trying to hack through the door so we can reach Veetor,” Shepard said, because she had to say something.

“And what will happen then?” Tali asked, with a touch of bitterness.

Shepard blinked. “Tali—”

“I don’t understand.” She continued to treat her colleague as she spoke, her voice rising in pitch. “You died. Joker saw you blown out of the ship by the final attack. How are you here?”

“I don’t know.” And it was terrifying to admit, out loud like that. “Yesterday I woke up on a table in a Cerberus lab thinking the Normandy went down a few days ago, at most. And then I found out it’s been two years. They got my… they got me somehow. Put me back together. Then they told me human colonies were being attacked and… I’m still trying to make sense of it.”

Tali said nothing. Tali didn’t even look at her. Shepard took a breath. It wasn’t a good time, but she couldn’t hold it in any longer. “What happened to my ship?”

“Joker swears it wasn’t geth. I don’t know what else it could have been.” Tali cleared her throat. “The Normandy was completely destroyed. About half the crew made it to the ground. It took a month for the Alliance to find them— keelah, but Garrus and I were going crazy. The Alliance wouldn’t tell us anything. Even Wrex was worried.”

About half. Her stomach dropped. “Who did we lose?”

A pause, longer this time. Tali glanced at her. “Pressly died in the opening attack, along with one of the co-pilots. A lot of engineering.” Her voice caught. Tali spent most of her tenure aboard the Normandy on the lower deck, in the engine room with Adams’ team. “One of the escape shuttles malfunctioned and killed most of the marines.”

Shepard’s throat closed. She couldn’t take a breath. Tali kept plodding along, determined to finish this grim recitation. “The CIC staff on duty died instantly. Bakari—”

“Is Kaidan alive?” she interrupted, unable to bear it a moment longer.
“Yes,” Tali said, with a hint of surprise, as if she hadn’t realized Shepard didn’t already know.

The fear that had ridden her every second of the last two days rushed out in one great flood, dashed against her feet and left her shaking with relief. She covered her face with her hands and took a great gulp of air.

Tali touched her shoulder, tentative, half-filled with wonder. “It really is you.”

She nodded, once, and tried again to steady herself, but god it was hard. “Yeah. It’s me.”

“Why didn’t you ask Cerberus about the Normandy?” Tali’s confusion was evident.

Shepard took another deep breath and glanced at her patient. He was unconscious, but stable. She wiped at her eyes and lurched to standing. “I don’t trust them. Not to tell me the truth, and sure as hell not to use it against me.”

“Liara also survived. And Adams, and Dr. Chakwas. I can give you the full list.” An even longer pause. “There’s only two Cerberus here. Even if they were keeping you prisoner, you could escape now. Unless they’ve implanted you with a bomb, or something.”

It was so absurd, even for Cerberus, that Shepard couldn’t help but laugh. Tali chuckled despite herself, but pressed the point. “Seriously, Shepard. Why are you here with them?”

She ran her hand over her hair. She’d been avoiding that question ever since she agreed to come in the first place, but gave Tali the good answer. “Because in ‘83, the beacon gave me a vision of annihilation at the hands of the reapers, and I have to do whatever is required so that doesn’t happen again. I can’t let down the people we lost. And I don’t know anything besides the reapers that would be interested, let alone capable, of abducting people in these numbers.”

Tali was still watching her. Shepard took a breath, and finished with the answer that wasn’t a good one. “And because if I leave Cerberus now, I’ll never know what they did to me. What happened in that lab.”

The not knowing was killing her, making her crazy every time she dwelled on it for more than two seconds put together. Because the unspoken part was, I’ll never know how they changed me.

Some it must have shown on her face, or maybe it was only the obvious and ominous glow of her scars in the darkened hab, but after a few seconds Tali nodded. “It’s a dangerous path, but I think I understand. A little, anyway.”

She cleared her throat. “What about you? Picking up wayward pilgrims seems a little beneath your skills.”

Tali acknowledged this with a shrug. “We were in the area. And we thought…”

“What?” Shepard raised an eyebrow.

“I have a mission of my own now. One that Cerberus doesn’t need to know.”

“Tali, it’s me.”

She glanced away. “It’s inside geth space. Building on what we learned chasing Saren. We thought the geth might be involved in these abductions, continuing to serve the reapers, but now… that doesn’t seem as likely.”
The comm came to life, startlingly them both. Miranda. “Shepard, we’ve got the hatch open. You should come quickly. This isn’t good.”

Tali jerked her head towards the door. “Go. I’ll stay here and finish patching them up.”

Shepard made her way to the security station. Miranda stood back, her arms folded over her stomach, shaking her head in disapproval. Jacob held his gun pointed at the floor, awkward, out of place. He’d comported himself well fighting the mechs, both here and on Lazarus, but once the fight ended he had little notion how to behave.

If there was one thing Shepard learned from her six-month stint as a spectre, it was that fighting was only a minor aspect of the job. Realizing that sense of responsibility, of authority, never left her, despite everything that had happened, was as surprising as the rest put together. Shepard hadn’t even wanted the spectre gig in the first place. It was a political necessity. Now its mantle was the most normal thing she’d felt in days.

She brushed past them both and entered security. Her weapons remained in their holsters.

A quarian in a red-and-bronze envirosuit shrank before a bank of monitors. Each one showed an anomalous response, presumably all the mechs they’d taken offline through combat. His three-fingered hands roved across the haptic keys. “No… nononono. Monsters won’t get me. Mechs protect me.”

Shepard stopped a few feet away from him. “Veetor?”

He mumbled under his breath, too low for her omni-tool translator to catch. The quarian flotilla pidgin that had become the lingua franca of the Migrant Fleet wasn’t among the languages the Alliance xenolinguistics specialists back home considered important to teach N7 officers, even ones like Shepard, who had a certain knack for foreign tongues. She didn’t know more than the odd phrase. She dialed up the sensitivity of her equipment and tried again. “Veetor, it’s ok. The attack is over.”

“Need mechs.” The tubes leading out of the back of his helmet shuddered. “Monsters come back with the swarms. Have to hide.” His voice went up. “Mechs not responding. Must get through!”

Shepard put her hand on the chair and spun it around, forcing him to look at her. He cringed away. His chest was heaving, and where his hands gripped the chair, his arm muscles trembled beneath the skin of the suit. His face mask turned left and right, trying to avoid her eyes.

She knelt down to his level but didn’t touch him. “Veetor. Veetor, you’re safe now. We’re here to help you.”

“She’s lost his mind,” Miranda said, coming up behind her.

Shepard glanced up at her. “Shut the hatch.”

Her brow furrowed, but she did as she asked, Jacob stepping in as it closed. Darkness descended on the control room. Veetor calmed a bit. “You’re not from the colony.”

“We arrived after the attack.” She looked him over. He didn’t appear physically injured. “I’m Nathaly. I’m trying to figure out what happened here.”

“M-monsters,” he said again, tripping over the word. “They hit everybody. Took them away. They’ll take me too.”
“Nobody is going to hurt you.” She folded her arms over her knees, balancing on the balls of her feet. “Can you tell me what you saw?”

Veetor winced, but he reached for the display controls. “I can show you.”

He cued up a video sequence that spread across the entire array. It captured different vantages of the colony, the angle suggestive of security cameras, playing in lockstep. The quality wasn’t high. Shepard had to squint to make any sense of it, standing again to get a better view.

Miranda stepped up beside her, likewise scrutinizing the footage. “This is from the attack. He must have pieced it together manually.”

Shepard’s gaze cut to her. She was speaking as though Veetor weren’t sitting right there. Jacob, however, had sharper eyes than the rest and interrupted. “Look, there.”

He pointed to a corner monitor. Miranda gasped. “My god. I think that’s a Collector.”

“Don’t Collectors keep to the galactic core?” Shepard had never seen one, not even in pictures. The Collectors were a rumor only, a race from the uninhabitable, unreachable, unexplored center of the galaxy, barely hinted at by Terminus mercs deep in their cups. The kind of story she’d be a fool to believe, but with just enough ring of truth to stay her doubt.

“They earned their name collecting rare genetic material. They trade high technology for specimens.” Miranda stated this as though it were accepted fact. “If the Collectors are involved, it would explain why nobody’s made headway preventing these attacks. They’ve never been a big enough player to attract attention.”

On the screen, fuzzy images of the Collectors seized equally grainy forms and loaded them into coffin-sized pods. Shepard assumed they were the colonists. “What in the hell?”

Jacob leaned forward, appalled, but unable to look away. “They’re… stowing them? How? Why didn’t anyone fight back?”

“The seeker swarms,” Veetor spoke up, the harsh electronic overlay of his suit cutting across the hush of human voices. “Like insects. You can’t hide. They find you, sting you, freeze you, and then the monsters take you away.”

“Miniature probes, maybe,” Miranda speculated, pushing her hair behind her ear. “Programmed to find a victim and immobilize it with a stasis field or nerve toxin.”

Jacob stuck out his jaw. “Maybe that’s why they left the quarian. Maybe they weren’t programmed to look for quarians, or the envirosuit confused them.”

“Only human colonies have been hit,” Miranda admitted, frowning at the footage.

On the screen, a host of Collectors directed the evacuation of dozens of pods, floating on mass effect fields towards a loading dock. Presumably, it led to a ship not in view of the cameras. Shepard never saw anything like it. “What do they want with human colonists? We’re not exactly rare genetic specimens.”

Veetor shuddered again. “They’ll be back for me. They took everyone else. No one escapes.”

The security recordings ended. Shepard looked back at the quarian. “Thank you. You were very helpful.”
The praise seemed to encourage him. Veetor sat up a little straighter. “I studied them. The monsters. The swarms. I took readings with my omni-tool.”

Miranda grew excited. “We need to get that data to the Illusive Man. Grab the quarian and I’ll call the shuttle.”

“What?” Shepard said, at the same moment the hatch flew open and Tali stormed in. Tali stepped between Veetor and the humans. Every muscle in her body was rigid with indignation. “He’s injured. He needs treatment, not an interrogation.”

“We won’t hurt him—” Jacob started.

Miranda didn’t let him finish. “Your people tried to betray us once already. If we let him go, we’ll never get the intel we need.”

“Prazza is an idiot, but he and his people paid for it.” Tali glanced from one face to the next, her luminous eyes shining out like stars behind the opaque purple glass. “Please, take the data if you want, but let me bring Veetor home.”

Shepard turned around and faced Miranda directly. “Veetor is going back to the flotilla. Tali will send us a copy of his data.”

For several endless seconds, the two women stared each other down. Miranda blinked first. Shepard wagered it had less to do with her, and more to do with crossing her boss a second time in as many days. He’d ordered her to comply with Shepard’s command. Miranda gave her a deliberate nod. “Understood, Commander.”

There was a definite emphasis on the military title that conveyed something other than respect. But that was a problem for another time.

Tali was relieved. “I’m glad to see you’re still giving the orders.”

“Good luck,” Shepard said, because the only alternative was begging her not to go, to not leave her alone with these people. But Tali already tried that, and she turned her down.

Tali held her eyes a long moment. “You too, Shepard.”
You Can't Go Home

July 2185

It was four hours back to Minuteman Station. Shepard did not speak a single word. Not that Jacob or
Miranda tried to engage her. They talked quietly to each other, heads bowed together. Whether it
was out of politeness, trying not to disturb her, or because she was in fact the subject of the
conversation, Shepard couldn’t say.

As soon as she stepped onto the dock, the VI made an announcement. “Shepard, the Illusive
Man will speak with you now.”

She was still in her hardsuit, still fully armed. “I don’t know the way to the comm room.”

Once more, the VI directed her via lights in the corridor. She followed them, barely registering the
scenery, collecting her thoughts. Seeing Tali, or more to the point Tali’s shock over her recent
company, brought this decision into sharp perspective. Shepard was starting down a road she
might not be able to follow back. Her heart wanted to tell the Illusive Man where he could stick his
partnership and go home.

Home. Shepard never felt like she had anywhere that fit the name. Her dad had a little pre-fab just
off Hellas Naval Base on Mars but it wasn’t more than a place to visit at holidays, when she or her
mom could get leave. Her tiny apartment on Arcturus— that was funny, basic base housing, no
more than a place to dump her crap and a bed to sleep between missions. In fact, the only time
she’d felt at home for years was aboard the Normandy, just before Ilos, when she woke up next to
Kaidan and for five short minutes everything made perfect sense.

She had the luxury of being picky back then. Now, home meant away from Cerberus and back in
Alliance space. Home meant reporting in at the first naval outpost she found. That was real, a
solid base beneath her feet to start piecing together what was left of her life.

But… what happened at Freedom’s Progress was real, too. Politically, the Terminus was too
sensitive for the Alliance to offer any real help. Maybe a spectre could get away with it, but
Shepard didn’t have that anymore, either. And even if she was reinstated, even if the navy allowed
her free reign and gave her the resources to pursue this enemy, there wasn’t a chance in hell they’d
let her go before a thorough investigation.

That meant a lab and the horrors of medical curiosity from personnel who would assume she was
dangerous, a Cerberus plant or worse, until proven otherwise. It’s what she’d do in their position.
Maybe they weren’t even wrong; Shepard had no way of knowing what little traps Miranda might
have left inside her mind or body. And she very much doubted the navy doctors would ever
understand the half of it, no matter how they poked or probed, or how much of the horrors of
Lazarus Station she was forced to relive.

For that, she needed Miranda. For that, she needed to play along a little while longer.

Shepard stepped on the holocomm pad with a muttered curse, and waited for the Illusive Man to
load in. Telling herself all the while that it wouldn’t be the first time she had to work with
someone she hated, or couldn’t trust. She wasn’t very convincing.

He looked much the same as before. The office remained rich and immaculate, the man himself in
a different but equally stylish suit. She felt filthy in her dirty hardsuit, Prazza’s blood a dull red
streak down the black armor plating, her too-short hair matted to her scalp.

The Illusive Man dispensed with the pleasantries. “Good work on Freedom’s Progress. The quarians have forwarded their data on the attack. Surprising, given our history.”

Shepard held herself stiffly. There was nothing about this conversation she was going to like. “Tali’s history with me is very different from the quarian history with you.”

He ignored the jab. “More importantly, you confirmed the Collectors are behind these attacks.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“The patterns are there, buried in the data.” The vague answer was waved away just as quickly, before she could lodge a protest. “The Collectors utilize the Omega 4 relay, which no other vessel has ever survived. Evidently, it reacts differently to Collector ships. The ability to manipulate a mass effect relay is highly suggestive of ties to the reapers.”

Of course he wouldn’t trust a dubious new ally with a truly vital task. The lie stung all the same. But she realized there was a more important question. The Illusive Man’s motives would always be suspicious; spending breath on them was a waste of time. “Why humans? Why now?”

“The Collectors have long held a keen interest in exotic genetic specimens, from a variety of species, including humans. But those samples were in the dozens. Now they’re collecting hundreds of thousands, exclusively human. What do you think?”

Shepard folded her arms. She had no time for guessing games, either. “Somehow we caught their eye.”

“Humanity defeated Sovereign. That might be enough to attract the reapers’ attention.”

She shrugged. “So what the hell do you want me to do about it? I don’t know how to survive the galactic core any better than you.”

“I won’t wait for the reapers to catch us by surprise. I want to bring the fight to them.” His eyes grew very cold. “I want you to determine a means to traverse the Omega 4 relay and end the Collector threat.”

Shepard’s eyebrows climbed into her hair. “Remember when I said you could have had an army for what you spent on me?”

“Remember when I said I needed someone who can lead?” He hit a button on his chair. An alert light on her omni-tool indicated a large quantity of information downloading to her now. “I’ve already compiled a list of mercenaries, scientists, and biotics. You’ll have their dossiers shortly.”

“I had good people. People I could trust.” Half her crew dead, Tali had said. “I don’t want yours.”

He actually laughed. “They’re not my people. They’re… suggestions. Convincing them to join up is your job.”

“Let’s get one thing clear. I do this on my terms, or not at all.” She stared him down.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less. But I hope you’ll keep an open mind. We can’t afford to turn away useful resources.”
“Fine.” Anything to end this call. Shepard was in desperate need to take all this in, and figure out how she was going to manage this— under her own guidance, not his. Forget the Illusive Man’s motives. At the moment, she wasn’t entirely sure of her own. This felt like being forced to drink poison.

“One last thing before you go.” He tapped out a cigarette and lit up. “You can’t take on a mission like this operating out of a shuttle. There’s a ship waiting for you. I’ve taken the liberty of hiring a pilot.” The Illusive Man inhaled, blew out smoke, met her eyes with a hint of irony. “I hear he’s one of the best. Someone you can trust.”

The connection cut out before she could reply. She ran her hand over her head, and dropped it abruptly when she realized she was searching for her phantom hair bun. Mechs didn’t bleed, but there was enough sweat stuck between her and the hardsuit to make up for it. Her skin was hot, stretched too tight, ready to burst. The new suit was wrong, the rifle was wrong, and this newish body was made all the worse by being exactly wrong enough to keep rubbing away at her sanity. It was like somebody snuck into her house and moved everything three inches to the left.

Shepard steeled herself for another round of introductions, altogether sick of people, and left the comm room. The ship she could take or leave, but she wouldn’t be sorry to be gone from this station. Maybe by escaping it, she could escape Cerberus too, at least in all the ways that mattered.

The dock stood empty. Minuteman Station was light on staff to begin with, but right now, the lights were dimmed and her footsteps echoed on the walls. Cerberus had shut down for the night. Irritated, she went to the bank of windows, and folded her arms over her stomach to wait.

“Commander,” said a familiar voice behind her.

She turned in place. Her mouth dropped open.

A brown-bearded man about Shepard’s age hobbled towards her, his legs bound by metal braces, the cause of his halting gait. He was dressed in a Cerberus uniform. Beneath the brim of a ball cap, he wore a smile that reached all the way up into his green eyes. “Holy shit. They told me you were here, but… damn.”

“Joker,” Shepard managed. Words failed her. The last time she saw her pilot, he was screaming protests from the inside of an escape shuttle. “What are you doing here?”

“Long story. Alliance grounded me ‘cause I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, so when Cerberus made me an offer, I said screw ‘em and here I am.” He paused. “Not a long story after all.”

“You’re here voluntarily?” Shepard was still scrambling to catch up. “You joined Cerberus?” He held up his hands. “Whoa, nelly. Look, I know they’re into some shifty shit—”

“Joker!”

“—but you weren’t here. It got complicated.” He looked her up and down. “You’re taking this kinda personal, Commander.”

Her mouth snapped shut, because he was right, and because it made her furious. “The Illusive Man put you up to this? You can’t tell me you trust him.”

“Well.” Joker shrugged, joining her at the port and leaning on the metal sill. “I don’t trust anyone who makes more than I do. But he brought you back. Let me fly. That’s worth something, right?”
Shepard crossed her arms again, unable to believe he was serious. Her doubt spurred him on. “And there’s something else. They only told me last night, after they woke you up and hauled me back here.”

He nodded at the glass. Right on cue, the lights came up outside the station. They were looking out into a giant berth. Floating inside was a long, white ship altogether too familiar to Shepard’s eyes, even adulterated by Cerberus branding.

She took a step back. Joker went on, pride touching his voice. “Cerberus got ahold of the Normandy schematics, I don’t know how. Almost doubled the size. It’s amazing how close they held to the original lines. And holy crap, the drive core… Just like home, huh, Commander?”

“This will never be home,” she spat.

He stopped talking, and took her in. She studiously kept her frown fixed on the copy ship floating beyond the glass. The last Normandy went to pieces in front of her eyes. She could still feel the vacuum clawing at her lungs.

Her hand had drifted, inadvertently, to her throat. Joker forced a cough to cover his discomfort. “She’s loaded up and ready to go, ma’am. Most of the crew’s already aboard ship.”

“They won’t leave without us.” If nothing else, they needed their pilot. There were a thousand questions Shepard wanted to ask. She settled for one of the least controversial. “Do you know Miranda Lawson?”

“By reputation only.” He pulled a face. “The boss says jump, she says how high. And if you make fun of it, she’ll shoot you from midair.”

She took a deep breath. “Did you know Cerberus was working on me?”

The question hung in the air for several long seconds. Joker searched her face, shockingly grave, for him. “No. Got that surprise when I docked.”

They boarded the ship. Just like the old Normandy, the docking tube sat directly behind the bridge. Miranda and Jacob waited by the airlock. Joker shuffled towards the helmsman’s couch. Shepard would have rather joined him there, shut out the unwelcome Cerberus crew a little while longer— she didn’t think she would ever be able to think of Joker as “Cerberus crew”— but her handlers had other ideas.

Miranda all but herded her into the CIC. The layout of the fore section of the deck was likewise identical. A short gangway aft of the bridge led to a roughly triangular room dominated by a large peninsula festooned with holographic projections. The most critical of these was the galaxy map, a three-dimensional representation of the Milky Way that served as the ship’s navigational interface. Currently, an orange-lined schematic holo of the ship occupied the remaining space.

The similarities ended with the floor plan. The Alliance preferred dark colors for their ship interiors, paired with orange lighting, like the submarines of old. This preserved dark vision among the crew and allowed them to see detail when they looked out the ports during a battle, admittedly a more crucial function on ships with a less radical design. This new Normandy was done in Cerberus black-and-white, as brightly lit as an operating theater, and crewed by quietly serious people doing their best not to stare as their new skipper, tired and dirt-streaked in her armor, took her place at the far end of the room.

It was equally hard to overlook the scale of this ship. The original Normandy extended only a little
beyond the CIC, into a small comm room Shepard had also used for briefing her crew. She doubted she was even halfway along the length of this one. An elevator door was centered on the aft wall. No stairs, then. She never thought she’d be nostalgic for jogging up and down them in the mornings.

“This place is going to be filthy inside two weeks,” she said, because they were waiting for her to say something, and all the serious replies weren’t anything she wanted to share. “All this white paint.”

A smoothly electronic voice, female, spoke from the terminal behind her. “The Normandy SR-2 was not intended to be an exact copy. Seamless improvements were made.”

Shepard turned in place. A holographic globe of glowing blue lights, no larger than a basketball, had sprouted from the peninsula. It pulsed in time to its own cadence. “Hello, Shepard. I am EDI.”

An information panel popped open beside the globe, titled The Enhanced Defense Intelligence.

The electronic voice was too bright, too emotional. It pronounced itself Edy, like the name, rather than E-D-I like a piece of equipment. Shepard’s eyes narrowed. “What is an EDI?”

Miranda spoke up. “The ship is equipped with a state-of-the-art artificial intelligence to manage automated operations as well as our electronic warfare suite.”

Several seconds passed in silence. Shepard’s mouth thinned into a line. Deliberately, she turned her back on the globe and crossed her arms. “I don’t want it on my ship.”

“Have I offended?” EDI asked.

Miranda looked at the AI, directing her eyes over Shepard’s shoulder, as though she were speaking to a person. “Commander Shepard has had poor experiences with AI. The Hannibal system on Luna, and then the geth.”

Shepard’s eyes cut to her. There were maybe twenty people in the galaxy who knew about the rogue AI the navy evolved at their training camp on the moon. Not counting the dead.

“I see. At least your objections are grounded in data, rather than the blind distrust of most organics.” EDI’s intonation never wavered. If it was hurt or angered by Shepard’s rejection, it didn’t let on. “I was designed to be of service to Cerberus and the crew of this ship. I think you will find me quite different from the geth.”

Jacob cleared his throat. “We’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“Indeed.” Miranda put her hand on her hip, leaning out a bit. “Our objective is clear. We need to find a way to neutralize the swarms so we can engage the Collectors, and figure out what signaling they employ to pass through the Omega 4 relay unscathed. Then we’ll take the fight to them.”

Jacob folded his hands behind his back, unconsciously falling into a classic military rest stance. “It won’t matter if we don’t have the right people with us.”

“Quite. I’d recommend starting with the dossiers we’ve prepared. We’ll need a scientist straight off—exactly the sort of mind to work out a solution for the swarms. Unless we can neutralize them, we’ll never get close to the Collectors.”

Shepard squared her shoulders and drew herself up, clicking her heels together crisply. “You’re
not in command of this ship. I am.”

“It was a suggestion.” Miranda was exasperated. “I won’t do you or this mission any good keeping silent.”

Jacob intervened. “Orders, Commander?”

She glanced at the ceiling. “Joker?”

“Present and accounted for.” He sounded nothing short of thrilled.

Shepard grimaced. “Get us the hell out of here.”

“You want to be a little more specific?”

“Any direction that puts this station to our rear.” She needed a few still moments to collect her thoughts before she had any idea where to go next. The ship might be a Cerberus vessel, but it was her Cerberus vessel and she wanted off their turf.

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

She turned back to Miranda, moving down the list. “I need the names of the personnel killed aboard Lazarus Station, and contact information for their families, if you have it.”

Miranda was surprised. “What? Why?”

“They were your people. They served under your leadership and they died on your watch.” Shepard’s voice was very cold. She hadn’t forgotten their complete lack of regret as they boarded the shuttle to escape Lazarus. “As your commander that makes them my problem now. And if you’re too shameless to show them proper respect, I will damn well do it for you.”

The two women stared each other down for a small eternity. At last, Jacob couldn’t take it anymore. “I’ll do it. I’ll get the list together and… take care of things.”

Shepard was willing to accept his offer, but Miranda replied before she could say so. “No. I’ll do it.”

Shaking her head, she called for the elevator and departed the deck. Shepard glanced at Jacob, whose worried gaze lingered on the hatch— on Lawson. She decided to be blunt. “How long have you worked with Miranda?”

“Two, maybe three years?”

“And you were together, right? At least some of that time?”

He gaped. Shepard had no patience for it “You’ve got a familiarity that goes beyond professional, and the vibe doesn’t read ‘war buddies’ to me. Not to mention this is the fourth or fifth time you’ve jumped in to spare her comfort.”

He was more nervous now than when he told her about Cerberus, twiddling his thumbs behind his back. “It’s in the past. I assure you, it won’t affect the mission.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t care what’s going on between you. I just like to understand the people I’m working with.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He didn’t seem to know how to reply.
She glanced around the CIC, watching the lower-ranked crew busily pretend they weren’t hanging on every word. Scuttlebutt was the same, currency and entertainment alike, navy or not. A wave of weariness hit her. This slapped-together body was worn out, and the new hardsuit was starting to itch. “Where’s the skipper’s quarters?”

“All the way at the top,” he said, calling the elevator. “You’ve got the whole deck to yourself. The construction crew called it the loft.”

“Perfect.”

He saluted as she boarded. The gesture threw her, coming from him. She didn’t quite manage to return before the hatch shut between them.

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Shepard started awake in the dark, the last fragments of troubled dreams of knives and tubes scattering like smashing glass. She didn’t recall falling asleep. She didn’t recall this room, either, three degrees too cold and far too large for her comfort. Shadows shrouded the far corners and darkened the cavernous ceiling. No skipper’s quarters should be so big. It was wasteful. Beyond wasteful—extravagant.

Inch by inch, her skin peeled free of the hard leather couch as she sat up. The last few days came back in jumbled memories almost as bad as the nightmares. Human abductions, Tali, Veetor and monsters. Collectors. What the hell were Collectors doing sacking a human colony? Cerberus. Waking up in a cold white room with a scalpel-laden robot dangling over her head—

She swallowed, took a few deep breaths, her blood pounding in her ears. She forced herself to look around her new home.

Jacob called it the loft. Her quarters. Cerberus decorated the place in their trademark minimalism, with square and functional furniture that conveyed a certain amount of expense. Like everything else on the ship, it was colored black and white. There were no Cerberus emblems. She questioned whether Miranda removed them in haste, or if somebody working here had more common sense than the people aboard Minuteman Station.

An aquarium built into the bulkhead dominated one wall. Shepard estimated it at a thousand liters, though its only current occupants were a handful of fake plants and a pair of bubblers. The light from the tank provided the sole illumination in the room. As she stood, she nearly tripped over a coffee table.

“Lights,” she said. The SR-1 had a VI to handle that sort of function. Uttering the request was automatic.

Recessed lamps came to life, taking several seconds to reach full power. EDI asked, “Do you require anything else?”

“No,” she answered shortly, vowing to use a light switch in the future. EDI held her silence. Shepard tried to avoid dwelling on the difficulty of escaping the Illusive Man while his electronic pet kept tabs on her every move, and instead looked around her quarters.

A king-sized platform bed took up most of the aft portion of the room, considerably more inviting than the couch. Above it, a skylight port larger than the mattress was cut into the roof. Plasma trails, a byproduct of the ship’s FTL drive, washed over the glass in shades of blue and green. Joker followed her orders. They were in interstellar space.
As she stared out, her skin grew cold and her lungs began to burn. A vision of the SR-1’s hull laid open by the attack hovered over her waking eyes, the CIC crew blown into the void by explosive decompression, ragged debris hovering ghostlike in the vacuum. She shuddered and looked away. Small wonder she hadn’t wanted to sleep there.

Pieces of her hardsuit lay scattered across the deck. She hadn’t neglected a suit like that since… well, ever. Even at the height of her messier inclinations she always took proper care of her gear.

She rubbed her hand across her face and touched a small ocean of grease. At the least, she could delay going below for the sake of hygiene. Nobody would argue against that, not even her waiting Cerberus crew. Shepard creaked to her full height, every inch of her still aching, and made her way to the head.

She found it through a pocket door forward. Spotless white tile, stainless steel fixtures, tall ceilings. Certainly stylish, but her ass wasn’t looking forward to midnight bathroom trips to a cold metal commode.

A small closet held an assortment of toiletries. The selection made her skin crawl. Cerberus somehow got a list of all her preferences—her customary brand of shampoo, her favorite lipstick right down to the precise shade, her model of hairbrush with a comb laid neatly beside it. There was even a bar of navy-issue soap. Shepard wasn’t sure she herself could have replaced it all from memory, but not one item was out of place. Nobody should be so familiar.

Cerberus expected her to pick up her life as if two years comatose was nothing. Settle in as if this copy ship and its copy crew were a basic re-cast of the SR-1, just like Joker had. Here comes Season 2.

Like nobody died. Like nothing changed at all.

Shepard seized the items by handfuls and flung them into the depths of the closet, faster and faster, down into the darkness beneath the lowest shelf where she didn’t have to look at them. Tubes and bottles rolled out onto the floor. Packages bounced off the back wall. Glass cracked, spilling out over the tile. She got down on her knees and shoveled the lot inside, long liquid streaks trailing their broken containers and coating her palms, and then grabbed a towel and hurled it over the pile as though hiding it would take it out of the universe.

She sat back heavily, ran her fingers through her hair heedless of the goop, and tried to still her own trembling. Screams were piling up behind her mouth again, not words, but an endless rusty wail that had been fighting to get out since Jacob said two years and the world imploded around her. Her cabin was likely bugged, the better for Miranda and that damned AI to spy on her, and while she hoped they’d have the tact not to wire the bathroom, she couldn’t count on it. Nowhere was safe. She didn’t dare make a sound. But she could sit here on the cool floor and let the sense of grief-stricken panic play out in silent shaking.

Shepard allowed herself one full minute of that.

Then she took a deep breath, pulled back the towel, and methodically picked out the things she needed to get clean. Toothbrush and paste, shampoo, soap. She gathered them together, and reached for the vanity to haul herself to her feet, where she came abruptly face to face with her own reflection, in the mirror above the sink.

At first she simply stared, stunned. Then, slowly, she sagged against the countertop like a deflating balloon. “Well, shit.”
Her fingers traced the jagged scars scrawled across her cheek, curling around her eye, cut into her brow, each sliced into her skin raw like claw marks. No angle of her face was entirely free of them. The cybernetic glow washed out her freckles, and lent her blue eyes a ruddy, eerie cast. Shepard’s looks were always solidly unremarkable, but the woman in the mirror was grotesque, every inch a science experiment. Small wonder Tali was so shocked.

There was no help for it. Hands shaking only slightly, she reached for the toothpaste, because if she spent one more second looking at that horror show, she would cry, and she didn’t want to do that.

It was ridiculous. Scars never bothered her. But this was her face, and these weren’t minor scars. This was wearing what Cerberus did to her like a banner for everyone to see and judge.

Keeping her back to the mirror, she showered, toweled dry, combed her hair. Tried not to think about how she didn’t even need the brush. Replaced the towel over the pile of unwanted stuff.

It took the better part of ten minutes to figure out the high-tech clothes storage system built into the bulkhead beside her bed, but eventually she got it to spit out another clean tank top and a pair of unmarked khakis. It, too, was stocked with Cerberus uniforms. This was the best she could manage.

She holstered her pistol about her hips, left the scattered pieces of her hardsuit where they lay, and went down to the CIC.

The worst thing about this ship was the similarity. Everything was the same, and everything was wrong, all at once, like Cerberus copied over what they did to her body to her ship. Walking out onto the CIC, she half-expected to see Bakari standing his post, manning the comm beside the galaxy map.

But Bakari was dead. She found his body trapped by a fallen bulkhead. And in place of his small, dark form stood a young woman, thin and strawberry blonde. Where he taped a picture of his son, she placed a sticky note with a Cerberus logo, a bullet list of reminders in tidy handwriting.

The girl noticed her at last, startling Shepard from her reverie. “Commander, ma’am, welcome aboard.”

She offered a salute with a hundred tiny things wrong. Shepard suspected it was the first time she’d attempted the gesture, but returned it anyway, to be polite. “Who are you?”

“Kelly Chambers, ma’am. I’ve been assigned as your yeoman.”

Frigates weren’t large enough to rate a yeoman under Alliance protocol, and the Normandy had been her first shipboard command post. “That means the same thing in Cerberus as it does in the navy?”

Kelly nodded, and took a step towards her. “I’m sure you’re wondering why assign a yeoman to a crew this small.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

She glanced around, and lowered her voice. “Unofficially, my role is to observe the crew. This is a dangerous mission. I have a degree in psychology, and an obligation to see that morale remains stable.”

Shepard raised one red eyebrow. “Isn’t that an X.O.’s purview?”
“Maybe in the navy. The Illusive Man felt Operative Lawson would be preoccupied with other matters.”

Of course she would, sending reports back to him, on Shepard’s progress, Shepard’s ability to toe the line, and Shepard herself, an augment to the onboard AI. Her mood soured further. “Do as you like with the crew, but keep out of my head.”

Her face fell. “Yes, ma’am.”

Shepard was surprised to experience a pang of guilt. This whole ship itched like a fresh scab, making her irritable. She reached for a little civility. “What are you doing up so late?”

“Waiting for you.” A smile then, quick, conspiratorial. “Operative Lawson thought you might rise early.”

It was getting on near four a.m. Shepard held her peace. It wasn’t the girl’s fault. “As you were, Yeoman.”

Another flash of a grin as she turned back to her terminal. “Kelly’s fine.”

Shepard made her way to the bridge, feeling as though the entire crew were staring at her, and desperate for a familiar face. As she suspected, Joker was firmly ensconced in the helmsman’s couch, still wide awake. He had a new toy. Evidently an entertaining one. He patted the ship’s console. “Check it out, Commander. It’s my baby, good as new!”

“Better, from what I’ve seen.” The upgrades were hard to ignore. She told herself it wasn’t disloyal to admit the extra space and bright light represented improvements.

“Fits me like a glove. I mean, this seat is real leather.” He actually twirled the chair. “Military may set the hardware standard, but on a first-gen ship they could care less if the seats breathe. Civilian sector does comfort by design.”

“I don’t like it,” she said flatly. The parts of the ship like Joker’s couch or her cabin felt over-the-top, like a bribe, or misdirection. Years ago she’d been involved with a woman from an exceptionally wealthy family. This was how she handled disagreements. Nehal wasn’t raised to comprehend not being right, and was helpless with anyone not easily pacified by material distractions.

“Shocker, that one. C’mon, Commander. Maybe this ship is… I don’t know, a giant apology for the thresher maws. You know, all in the past, mistakes were made, let bygones be bygones?”

Her voice slowed, drawing out every syllable. “I think you’ve gotten too familiar with your new employers.”

He swallowed. “Anyway, it’s not like they gave you much of a choice. Real hard sell. Go back to the Alliance and try to explain all this, or help Cerberus with a suicide mission through an uncharted relay. Lousy options.”

They were. She relented somewhat, and tried to remember that none of this was Joker’s fault. “Technically this is a civilian ship. I guess I should count myself lucky you’re still wearing pants.”

“Yeah, the 24/7 surveillance kind of cramps my style.” His eyes slid to port.

Summoned by his comment, EDI materialized in her increasingly familiar blue globe, from a
projector built into the bulkhead. “Do you require assistance, Mr. Moreau?”

He muttered darkly. Shepard took the opportunity to ask a question. “How much of the ship do you monitor, EDI?”

“I have visual and auditory access in human-crewed areas, as well as maintenance areas. I am fully capable of inspecting my hardware and self-reporting anomalies.”

The globe pulsed placidly. Shepard eyed it. “Can I order you to disable certain feeds?”

“The ship is an extension of myself. It is akin to my body. Losing any of my sensors is most uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Of course not,” Joker said, pulling a face. “Who’d want us to know whether we can turn off the damned AI?”

“Only the Illusive Man has the authority to disable my sensors.”

So not quite her ship after all. Shepard wished she were surprised. “That’ll be all.”

“Shepard,” EDI said, and vanished from visual range. Though not, Shepard was certain, monitoring range.

She slid into a couch near Joker’s. “Where are we headed?”

“Good question. I liked the orders by the way. Just like old times. You get angry, and I get to pick how to burn our fuel.”

He did not mention that occasion was after Virmire, where they lost Ashley. Joker embraced bluntness but emotion bothered him. He wouldn’t compare the two directly. Shepard crossed her arms and put her feet up on the dash, through the holographic screen. “Maybe I trust your judgment.”

“We’re headed for Omega. Should take a few days. I thought it might help, I don’t know, orient us, or something. And I got the sense that you’re automatically against whatever Miranda suggests, so a place with lots of options is good.”

If her kneejerk response was that obvious, it probably was irrational. She sighed and looked over at her pilot. “Way too soon to expect any of this to be easy.”

Joker fidgeted with his cap, hesitating, which for him meant he was on the verge of saying something serious. “Look, I know you can’t understand this, but you missed the last two years. Some things happened.”

“So educate me.”

“The Council locked down the Sovereign ‘incident’.” His air quotes practically clanged. “Said it was geth, said it was Saren acting alone. Not a breath about the reapers. But when people who were there, people who knew better, tried to speak up— the navy came down on us like a shore leave hangover. Even Hackett didn’t say a word in protest.”

“We always knew the reapers would be a touchy subject. Maybe they’re not ready for a public reveal.” But she knew she was grasping at straws. Their greatest defense against the reapers had
always been awareness and preparation. Joker’s confirmation of everything she read online was disquieting.

“Anderson’s lost all influence because he won’t stop raising the subject, and the Alliance is letting him stand alone.” He shook his head, completely disgusted. “And the things people have said about you—”

“God, Joker, please tell me you didn’t sign up out of misguided loyalty to me.”

“You know, Ash was a little zealous for me, but I wish she could hear you say that. She’d lay your ass out.”

“Don’t you dare bring Ash into this.”

“Or what? You’ll shout at me? Been there, bought the t-shirt. And hitting cripples isn’t your style.”

Shepard blinked. Joker never got this angry. He dealt with his frustrations through sarcasm and wild rants. His face was flushed and the words came hard as bullets. “For speaking the truth about the reapers, for insisting you weren’t crazy, the navy grounded me. And it wasn’t just the Normandy crew. Go below decks and talk to your engineers. Ask them how they wound up with Cerberus. Go to med bay and ask Chakwas why she’s here.”

“Dr. Chakwas, too?” The iron-haired physician served as the chief medical officer aboard the SR-1. Shepard couldn’t imagine her leaving the navy.

“Yeah.” He settled a bit. “Found out after you went up for some shut-eye.”

She chewed her lip, and decided to hazard the question. “You talk to the old gang much?”

He was a long moment in answering. “Now and then. It got harder, after I left. Technically I’m a deserter. That makes catching up awkward.”

Shepard wondered how the navy would classify her, if she turned up now. “I saw Tali on Freedom’s Progress.”

“I bet she was surprised to see you.”

“You can say that twice.” She glanced at him. “Not you, though.”

“I had some advanced warning. And c’mon, Commander. You walked away from certain death so many times while we were fighting the geth, it was hard to believe it was for real this time.”

Shepard shook her head, equal parts annoyed and amused. “I think I’ll go say hello to the doc.”

“You know where to find me.”

But Shepard didn’t go directly to med bay. Instead, she wandered the ship, getting familiar with its crew. By her quick estimate, there were about thirty hands aboard, significantly less than the SR-1’s complement. For a ship twice the size. Something wasn’t adding up.

In engineering, in place of Adams’ crew of six, they had two engineers. Both ex-Alliance, and both thrilled to meet her. Both managing a drive core roughly twice as large as the original. Neither Daniels nor Donnelly seemed particularly enamored of Cerberus, though they were fed up with the Alliance. But unlike Joker, they didn’t know her at all, and she found herself stumbling in the face
of their derision for the navy.

It was impossible to believe the Alliance could have changed that much in two years. Two years, twelve days, if Jacob could be believed. If she’d known things would fall apart like this…

Shepard kept up the private rant on her way back up to Deck 3. What would she have done? Somehow manage to get to an escape shuttle through a plasma beam? Like being here would have made any kind of difference.

Only it would have. She knew it. Not that knowing helped.

She stared at the elevator doors as it rose. The thing was so well-oiled she couldn’t feel it moving. The doors simply opened after a time, and she was somewhere different. Fitting.

She’d never needed to talk to anyone real so badly in her life, to get her head clear, and there was nobody here who could begin to understand. She was well and truly on her own with it. But some people felt obligated to try, especially people who knew her.

Which is when she realized she was out of excuses to avoid med bay. She’d been everywhere else.

Dr. Chakwas was at her desk, reviewing logs. Her face lit up as she turned and saw Shepard at the hatch. “Commander. It’s wonderful to see you.”

Shepard smiled despite her misgivings. Chakwas hadn’t changed one bit. Even her attire was still a practical lab tunic—no sign of Cerberus anywhere. “What’re you doing here?”

“I kept in touch with Jeff, even after he went UA. A risk, but a small one. Eventually Cerberus contacted me.”

Shepard perched on the desk across from her. “You don’t seem the Cerberus type.”

“I’m not.” She was highly offended. “I was posted to the Naval Medical Center on Mars. Prestigious, but also…”

“Useless,” Shepard suggested, before thinking better of it. She cleared her throat. “I mean… unexciting.”

“Quite.” Chakwas chuckled, dryly. “When their agent offered me this post, I saw it as a chance to finally finish our mission. I owe everyone we lost that much. I owe you that much. So I got a leave of absence, and arrived just last week.”

It was something of a relief to hear Chakwas unknowingly cite her own reasons back to her. Like maybe she wasn’t completely unhinged to make that sort of bargain. “So the navy thinks you’re having, what, a nice vacation?”

“I said I had some personal matters to attend.” She sat back in her chair and folded her hands over her stomach. “The truth usually does just fine. But I haven’t joined Cerberus any more than you.”

“Joker has.” Shepard was still disgusted by his decision. It went against every principle she had, and she didn’t care if it carried a whiff of hypocrisy. Working with them, however temporarily, was not the same as working for them. Being conscripted wasn’t the same as volunteering.

“He doesn’t take care of himself like he should. I’m grateful to work with him again.” She cocked her head. “I could say the same of a certain commander of my acquaintance, on both counts.”

Even her sly smile couldn’t quell the now-familiar cocktail of anger and guilt. Shepard gestured to
her bevy of scars. “I’ve been awake for three days. None of this is my fault.”

“So I gather. Dr. Lawson’s records are woefully incomplete.” Chakwas was the first person she’d heard use Miranda’s title. A PhD didn’t seem Miranda’s style, but she was plenty smart, so Shepard supposed anything was possible.

“I’d like a copy of those records.” Actually, Shepard felt silly for not thinking to request them earlier.

“There’s not much there. As I understand it, the bulk of the files resided on Lazarus Station servers. And of course, Cerberus destroyed Lazarus Station after the mech incursion.”

“There must be backups somewhere.” Nobody in the galaxy would spend that many credits on a highly sensitive project without robust data storage. Even Shepard, a digital neophyte, knew that much.

Chakwas shrugged elaborately. “It’s of little consequence. I have the next best thing.” Shepard felt a trickle of trepidation. “What?”

“You.” The doctor flashed her a smile. “I’d like to take a few initial scans, just to get the lay of the land, as it were. To ensure I can treat you effectively should you come to any harm.”

*Flat on her back and unable to so much as twitch, watching a ceiling roll by. Thumped hard onto the next table like so much meat. Feeling a bruise blooming across her hip as the technicians joked together, maneuvering the scanner into place. One of them closes her eyes.*

Chakwas had gone to an exam table and clicked on the computer, humming to herself. Shepard backed away without any conscious intent whatsoever.

“If you’ll have a seat—” Chakwas glanced up, saw her halfway across the infirmary, and laughed, not unkindly. “It’s nothing invasive, I assure you.”

Shepard licked her lips. It felt hot in here. Suffocating. All she could think about was getting back into the cooler air of the mess outside. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Don’t be such a child,” she chided. Chakwas advanced on her, omni-tool extended.

“I don’t have time for this right now.” Her mouth speaking without her. She edged towards the hatch. A bead of sweat dripped down her neck.

“It will only take a few minutes to gather some initial data.” The doctor reached for her arm. Shepard tried to evade her, as politely as she could, but Chakwas was accustomed to nervy patients. “Really, now, Commander—”

The moment her fingers brushed her skin, something snapped. Shepard slapped her hand away and backpedaled into the wall. “Don’t you fucking touch me!”

It seemed to echo off the walls. Chakwas clutched her hand, staring at her in shock. Shepard’s heart flailed in her chest. Her palms were slick against the metal bulkhead. Shoulders smarting from the collision, she’d driven herself into it that hard.

Chakwas made a careful, quelling gesture. “Alright.”

It hit Shepard like a bucket full of ice water. The last few moments played through her mind.
“I need to— I should go.” Shepard slid further towards the hatch, humiliated and slightly alarmed. She didn’t lose control. Not like this. Not to people she cared about. She was always able to tamp it down.

“Commander—”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she babbled. Then she fled.
July 2185

The treadmill whined under the pounding of Shepard’s feet. It was a good treadmill, sturdy and long enough to accommodate someone of her height, and like everything Cerberus bought, it was absolutely top of the line. It could do anything from 0.1 to 3g. It inclined up to seventy degrees. It could even enclose her in a mass effect bubble and vary the atmospheric pressure or the proportion of oxygen, and goodness knew she felt out of shape after lying on a table for two years.

But she kept it on its most basic settings, because anything else would take precious minutes to set up, and by the time she got to the shuttle bay she needed to start running immediately. It was that or explode.

Her bed continued to go unused. She was developing quite the permanent crick in her neck from sleeping on the too-short couch.

And sleep she did. The nightmares continued, but she’d always had nightmares. What wasn’t normal was her inability to push past the lack of sleep. It came in fragmented pieces, thirty minutes here, an hour there, a mere ten minutes sometimes, adding up to more than a full night, absolutely none of it restful. At 0200 she gave up and came down here.

The ship was still and silent, with only the faint occasional groan of metal to tell her they were in space. It had been three days since she woke aboard Lazarus Station. Two since her lapse in the med bay. Shepard buried it the only way she knew how— with work. There were abduction reports to read, Collector dossiers to memorize, and crew rosters to review. Maybe she was going crazy, but she could still fix this specific problem. She still had the mission.

Her body still felt strange, stronger in some ways and weaker in others. Shepard hoped if she ran enough klicks and lifted enough kilos, eventually, it would feel right again. Hers again. Besides, it was honest work, clean sweat, and only involved Cerberus as the owners of the equipment. She couldn’t see any moral question in using their small gym.

Tali sent her other information along with Veetor’s data, a packet just for her, details of the SR-1’s fate. Shepard was shocked and heartbroken to hear how many died on the surface. Pakti. Tanaka. Chase. Everyone aboard shuttle three— how had that happened? How could she have let the shuttle fall into such poor repair that it crashed into the ice at terminal velocity? Talitha Draven, who had died on the hail-mary mission to find Normandy’s antenna, and even Tali didn’t know more about it than that. Shepard could ask Joker, but she wasn’t convinced he would tell her. He and Kaidan were the only ones present when she died.

Kaidan.

She reached forward and increased the treadmills’ speed, as if she could outrun the wave of guilt and longing. Her thoughts always caught on him, like tripping over a gap she couldn’t see until her foot found it, his absence a kind of whole-body emptiness that convinced her above all else that it really was 2185, because this wasn’t a few days’ worth of missing him. Something in her knew they’d been apart that long.

But Shepard couldn’t begin to face him. Couldn’t even imagine it without flinching away in shame. She’d hurt him worst of all, sending him away and then dying in just the way he predicted, just like she promised she wouldn’t. There was no way to fathom the words that could make up
A hooded face appeared on the treadmill’s dash, projected over the controls. Shepard started back to reality—the heavy thump of her shoes on the belt, the ragged strain of her breath burning her throat, the redolent musk of her sweat-soaked skin. For just a second, there was that hint of wrongness again, that thing she couldn’t quite identify, and then it was gone.

“Congratulations,” announced the figure, in a woman’s perky voice. “For running one hundred kilometers in under a week, you have been selected for a special prize. Enter the password to continue.”

Shepard slowed the treadmill and stepped off onto the sides as it came to a halt. She couldn’t see the speaker’s eyes, but she had pale skin and a prominent mouth. A solid rectangle of painted purple on her lower lip, repeated on her chin, was her only obvious adornment. She was unlike any marketing sprite Shepard had ever seen. “Excuse me?”

EDI spoke up, apparently misunderstanding Shepard’s question. “You have run 105.78 kilometers since boarding the Normandy three days ago.”

“Really?” She realized she’d spent a lot of time down here, but surely not that long…

A hint of amusement from the sprite on the dash. “Enter the password to receive your free gift.”

Scripted VIs couldn’t be amused. Shepard frowned, reached for her towel and wiped her face. “What the hell is this?”

The image pursed its lips. “I heard you were hardcore, Shep, but I figured you’d be up for a little intrigue.”

Shepard was in disbelief. “I don’t do nicknames. Who tries to contact someone through exercise equipment?”

The woman heaved an enormous sigh. “I should have known you’d be a stick in the mud. You’re running on that thing like you want to stomp it to death.” A quick smile, and a bob of her head. “Kasumi Goto, at your service.”

A small light of recognition flared in Shepard’s hindbrain. Miranda may have mentioned someone by that name, when they ran through the dossiers. “You’re the infiltration expert Cerberus tapped.”

The smile grew to a sunny grin. “Best thief in the galaxy.”

“Why does Cerberus think I need a thief?” She wiped the towel over the back of her neck, the cloth already soaked in spots.

“You tell me. They started looking for me, and I tailed them to find out why. They wanted an expert sneak for some big mission and offered a serious signing bonus.” Kasumi mugged a bit for the camera. “We cut a deal, and here I am.”

“A deal.” The way she phrased it made it sound like more than credits got written into her contract.

“I’m looking for my old partner’s graybox. Donovan Hock stole it, and I’m going to get it back.” For a moment, her face went very cold. “Keiji and I were together a long time. There’s a lot of memories stored in that implant. They belong with me.”

“This Hock wanted something stored in the graybox?” Shepard was floundering a bit. Her hatred for that.
for the Illusive Man ticked up another notch, for setting her up like this, making commitments on her behalf while pretending to leave the choice in her hands. And she was way too short on sleep to handle this kind of crap graciously.

“Keiji stumbled on a secret. The kind that could start a war. Hock killed him for it.” Kasumi glanced down. “Those memories are all that’s left of him.”

Shepard recognized grief when she saw it, and her own was too near the surface to be indifferent. Her anger softened. “Look, I don’t know what Cerberus promised, but I don’t work for them, and none of this was run by me. I’ll help if I can but our mission takes priority.”

“Sounds like they’re trying to play both of us. Risky move.” The idea seemed to please her. She did like intrigue. “But I’ll take it. I bet you’re dying to see what it’s like to run a heist with me.”

The projection disappeared. Shepard looked around. Kasumi raised her voice, calling down from the gantry running across the ceiling of the shuttle bay. “We should probably wrap this up. You look pretty silly standing there talking to a treadmill.”

Shepard scowled. If she’d wanted to play these kinds of games, she’d have signed up with intelligence instead of the marines. And it bothered her that this thief managed to hide on her not-that-large ship for days on end. Watching, waiting.

Kasumi smirked. “See you around, Shepard.”

Kasumi walked away along the narrow beam as easy as a cat. Shepard shook her head, and headed back to her cabin for a shower.

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She spent the pre-dawn hours playing catch-up. The galaxy had not been idle since the end of the war with the geth, and her knowledge of military technology was woefully out-of-date. The new thermal clips barely scratched the surface. Shepard found herself skimming the extranet for recent conflicts, looking for the most up-to-date information she could get on fielded equipment, and found no shortage of events. The turians somehow wound up in a minor civil war, though it looked to be winding down. And there was more on the corporate war on Garvug.

A side story on that subject caught her attention—commentary from Tuchanka, as Garvug was a largely krogan settlement. Specifically from a spokesperson for Clan Urdnot, currently the most powerful of the clans, led by none other than Urdnot Wrex. She read it twice, surprised, and then started laughing. Wrex had been so adamant about not going home or trying to fix krogan civilization. Apparently he couldn’t escape his sense of duty any more than her.

It was a rare bright moment in a slog that seemed unending. One of her trainers had a fondness for the phrase “drinking from the firehose”. Shepard never had a clearer idea what he meant. Her head seemed stuck in one long continuous throb, begging for a reprieve from the onslaught of new information.

Around 0530, she took pity on it at last, and headed down to the mess for breakfast.

The mess sergeant was already puttering about the stove. The SR-2 boasted a full kitchen, a far cry from the freeze pack meals of the ship’s first incarnation, and possibly the most welcome of the Cerberus improvements. He turned as she approached the coffee maker. “Morning, Shepard.”

At this point, she’d met most of the crew, names and faces at least. Familiarity would come more slowly. “Gardner.”
He waved her off as she reached for the pot. “I got that. You just sit down over there.”

Shepard felt strongly that she should be able to make her own damn coffee, but it wasn’t worth alienating her crew. Gardner took a very proprietary interest in his work. So instead she climbed onto one of the stools sitting near the counter. “What are we making today?”

“Scrambled hash,” he answered, cheerful as could be for an hour most of her new crew seemed to consider inhuman. The ship’s second watch was skeleton crewed at best. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Sugar.” She watched with resignation as he added a meager spoonful. “A little more.”

He repeated the process. Politeness warred with her hatred of bitter flavors. “Seriously, if it doesn’t have the texture of caramel, it’s not enough.”

To her luck, he laughed, and set the sugar canister and the mug in front of her. Like all the cooking equipment, the sugar had magnetic lid that clamped tight when not actively in use, and another that secured it to the counter, to prevent food flying about the deck in a fight. Momentum dampeners could fail, or have their power diverted to more urgent needs.

She poured and stirred until she was satisfied. “What brings a cook to a high-stakes Cerberus mission?”

“Cooking’s more a hobby.” He cracked several eggs into a clean bowl. “I’m your general handyman. Plumbing, HVAC, you name it. You ask your average avionics expert to unclog a toilet, and that fancy degree’s worth about as much as the paper stuck in the pipe.”

The mug paused halfway to her mouth. “The guy who cooks is fixing the toilets?”

“I wash my hands,” he protested. “Most of the time.”

She stared at him for half a second, appalled and trying not to show it, before she caught the glint of humor in his eye and let out a chuckle. “Sorry. You can’t blame me.”

“Nah, it’s fine.” He finished whisking the eggs with a fork and poured into into a skillet, already full of whatever filling he’d prepared. “You should’ve seen my kids’ faces when I’d pull something like that.”

“They’re grown now?” Gardner was gray-haired and balding, mid-fifties to Shepard’s eyes.

A shadow crossed his face. He busied himself with the spatula. “I worked eezo rigs on the frontier. Just a regular roughneck, but I did my day’s work. Took me away a lot. So I wasn’t there when the batarian raiders came.”

Her hands clenched around the mug. Gardner continued, not looking at her. “Alliance didn’t do jack or shit, of course. Just advised the survivors to evacuate. Said it was our own fault for living that far out in the Traverse. You want to know how a guy like me chooses Cerberus? That’s how.”

Shepard wasn’t sure what to say, so she went with something plain and honest. “I came up in the Alliance during the conflict in the Verge. Being spec ops, it was my job to go into the occupied colonies, raid the ships that took our people, and sometimes follow them back into the Hegemony itself.” She cleared her throat. Glanced down at her coffee, and back at him. “I’ve seen things I wish I could forget, and if any of those people had been someone I loved, I don’t know that I could have ever gotten over it.”

He paused. Looked up at her, as if that wasn’t quite what he expected. “Kirsten, Patrick, and
Laurie. My wife was Leah.”

“They sound lovely,” she said. “I’m sorry we couldn’t do better for them.”

“You really are, aren’t you,” he said at last. Then he turned back to the stove, and stirred the eggs with his spatula. “Cerberus said you were the real thing. Maybe it’s true.”

He slid the eggs onto a plate and passed it to her. She scrounged through a drawer for a fork. “I try, anyway.”

For some reason, that made him laugh again, and there was a just-perceptible lessening of tension. Shepard applied herself to the food.

Whatever her personal differences with her de facto X.O., Shepard couldn’t fault Miranda’s choice of crew. They were all immensely qualified for their posts, personable, and strongly motivated to see the mission through, Gardner as much as any of them. He wasn’t the only one with family in colonies threatened by Collector attacks, nor the first to lose that particular cruel roulette.

And like Gardner, most were ex-Alliance citizens, disenchanted with life in the Traverse after decades of war, at the navy’s failure to safeguard them.

Shepard took that personally. Spec ops was fundamental to the counter-offensive, against batarians, pirates, and geth alike. That lingering sense of insecurity was her failure as much as anyone’s. How could she fault them for looking for some kind of hope, even if placing that hope in Cerberus was deeply misguided? It wasn’t any more foolish than signing on with ExoGeni, and Shepard had fought tooth and nail for those colonists on Feros.

That complicated things.

Gardner caught her picking through the hash. “Aw, crap. Lawson warned me you were a vegetarian.”

“It’s alright,” she said, although it really wasn’t. Ground sausage was impossible to separate.

“You give that here,” he demanded, swiping her plate and starting up a fresh batch. And despite her protests, he refused to hear another word about it.

Within the hour, most of the crew had risen from their beds and trickled into the mess, and Gardner was too busy at his job for small talk. Shepard excused herself to the CIC.

Miranda was engaged in reviewing diagnostic summaries of essential ship systems. She broke off her conversation with EDI as Shepard approached. Shepard took a breath. “I’m still having trouble accessing Normandy’s systems.”

Miranda flashed her a perfectly sympathetic smile. Shepard had to stop herself from arguing she wasn’t that bad with technology, that Cerberus’ networks really were that obtuse. Miranda moved over to her terminal. “Of course. Let’s see what the problem is.”

She did her best to remain magnanimous. “I didn’t think anything could be any worse than navy protocols.”

“Cerberus security protocols are a little more cutting-edge.” Another glitzy smile.

Shepard found she was getting better at calming her itchy fists whenever Miranda opened her perfect mouth. At first she assumed Miranda’s casual insults were intentional, but she was increasingly convinced it was just a total lack of self-awareness.
Twenty minutes passed as Miranda broke down how to access shipboard and Cerberus systems, and walked her through the various accounts Cerberus established on her behalf. Shepard didn’t intend to use most of them. However, she was surprised to find a full inbox waiting at her new Cerberus email address. Most of them were dossiers of potential recruits along with additional reports she ordered. She set them aside for reading later, found a link to the extranet, and began the tedious process of reviving her personal accounts from before she was killed in action.

Email was up first. Cerberus could use their address for her, but for more personal correspondence, she wanted something that didn’t associate her with them. She’d used her navy address for eleven years. Naturally, that was no longer accessible. She tried anyway. Then she turned to her Citadel address. As a spectre, she seldom used it, but found it still worked. It would suffice until she could sort things out.

Next was finances. The closets full of Cerberus hospitality and Cerberus gear weighed on her mind. While they were in port, she wanted to replace as much of it as she could.

Miranda eyed Shepard’s extranet search. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to determine if any of my bank accounts are still active. There are a few things I need to pick up while we’re aboard Omega.” Her mouth pursed at the fruitless effort. As far as her bank was concerned, she no longer existed.

“Your assets were properly dispersed to your next-of-kin when you were officially declared dead,” Miranda informed her. “However, anticipating the need, Cerberus opened an account in your name with Intragalactic Financial Services. If the choice of banking institution does not meet with your approval, the funds are easily transferred.”

“I see.” Her sense of disquiet increased again. “Can you link me into the account?”

Miranda did so. Shepard spent the next several minutes scrolling through the information in silence. “I don’t think this is right,” she said distantly.

Her X.O. double-checked. “No, that’s correct.”

“There’s fifty thousand credits in here!”

“Ah, yes. We did just pass the fifteenth.”

“What does that—”

“Your monthly salary,” she explained succinctly. “Cerberus rewards extraordinary talent.”

Shepard was aghast. “My monthly salary is fifty thousand credits?”

As a lieutenant commander in the Systems Alliance Navy, her standard pay plus combat bonus amounted to less than one would expect. She was aware mercenary fees for highly skilled personnel were exorbitant, but this left her stunned.

Miranda, however, took the statement a different way and hurried to reassure her. “Baseline salary only, of course. The Illusive Man believes strongly in incentive-based pay. You’ll find Cerberus has a highly robust bonus scheme.”

She offered an encouraging smile. Shepard looked from Miranda to the account summary waiting quietly at her terminal, dumbfounded. She felt suddenly dirty. As far as she was concerned, she never signed up with Cerberus and she wasn’t about to let them buy her, either. But on the other
hand, she badly needed her own stuff, for her sanity. The Cerberus-supplied items, right down to the canned music pre-installed in her cabin, gave the impression of living in a Nathaly-themed dollhouse.

She closed the search with a jab of her index finger and resolved to use as little of the cash as possible.

“We’re en route to Omega,” Miranda said, betraying her curiosity. “Do you have a plan for our arrival?”

“You weren’t wrong about needing a scientist.” Much as it grated to admit. “You mentioned a salarian?”

“Mordin Solus.” Miranda dismissed the holo of the Normandy occupying the center console, and replaced it with one of a pale-skinned salarian missing one horn. “He’s a trained geneticist, highly respected in his field. If anyone can unravel the toxin the Collector swarms use, it’s him.”

A collection of small wrinkles gathered under his eyes. Shepard knew salarians had short lifespans, but had no real grasp of how to tell their age. Still, this one looked... not elderly exactly, but certainly beyond middle-age. A small grin tugged at his mouth. As if he had trouble being entirely serious for even the slight space of a photograph. And his eyes had an odd quality, like whatever was going on behind them was so bright it couldn’t help shining out.

She continued to stare at the holo, as if it were a puzzle. “What makes an elite scientist pack up and move to shithole like Omega?”

Miranda shrugged. “Got me. I always leave that place feeling like I need a shower.”

Shepard chuckled. “I guess we don’t disagree on everything.”

Miranda gave her a startled glance— but not a particularly displeased one. Shepard shook her head. “I’m going to find a quiet corner and read through the rest of these dossiers. You have the deck.”

Later that evening, Jacob paid Miranda a visit. She glanced up from her work. “Something on your mind?”

She’d wasted no time settling into the X.O.’s quarters. Located on Deck 3 in the same spot as the skipper’s quarters aboard the old SR-1, the cabin afforded her a front office where she could write her reports and meet with crew, and a more private bedroom aft with a nice view of the stars. She sat at her terminal, typing, while Jacob ensconced himself in one of the guest chairs with his hands folded over his stomach. He’d had less to do since they came aboard, and was beginning to grate on her nerves.

“She’s not exactly what we expected,” he said, referring to Shepard.

“We knew there would be psychological distress.” She didn’t take her eyes from the screen. A small crease appeared on her brow. “Doubtless the rough exit from Lazarus Station amplified her reaction.”

“What happened back there? Wilson was always more invested in his bottom line than the project, but this? Did the Shadow Broker get to him?” Jacob remembered the struggle to capture Shepard’s remains. Among other things, that mission was a cornerstone of Miranda’s efforts to recruit him.
“Possibly. His surface motives were certainly mundane.” Miranda tore her attention from her reports, and folded her hands on the desk. “He reprogrammed the mechs as a distraction, at Rasa’s request. I don’t think he meant things to get so out of hand. Certainly, he didn’t intend to get shot himself. And finding her serving two masters would hardly surprise.”

“As for what?”

“I was over in D-wing because there was a security breach at the clone lab. Between that and the mechs, I wasn’t able to stop Rasa before she reached the shuttles.” She shook her head, disgusted by events and her own inability to prevent them. “She escaped with the most mature of the specimens.”

“Rasa stole a clone?” He sat up. “What does she want with it?”

“God alone knows. She was fascinated by the clones, by Shepard, and frustrated with assembling crew dossiers. She called it desk work. Maybe the theft was her way of sticking it to Cerberus before she took her leave. Or maybe the Broker approached her, and she offered Wilson a split.” Miranda kept quiet on her deeper suspicions. Jacob was unaware of the depth of Rasa’s failure on her final mission to recover Shepard’s spectre files, nor the Illusive Man’s attempt to assassinate her afterwards, and she saw no reason to enlighten him. Whatever Rasa’s obsession with Shepard, survival had to be her primary objective, whether on her own or under new patronage. She wasn’t about to stick around and wait for the Illusive Man to finish the job.

Jacob frowned, digesting the news. “Is that why the Illusive Man took this assignment away from you?”

“He gave me a thorough tongue-lashing. We were supposed to wake Shepard gradually, get her used to the idea of being associated with our organization.” Miranda shrugged, though with such stiffness that it betrayed the show of indifference.

Her advocacy kept Rasa alive after the botched assassination, when both the Illusive Man and Kai Leng wanted to let her die. Regardless of her personal feelings towards Rasa, Miranda hated to waste an investment. Two doses of bad judgment proved more than her boss was willing to overlook.

Her ego was stung. Though the screw-up was squarely on her shoulders, at the same time, the Illusive Man discarding her in favor of somebody overtly opposed to Cerberus rankled. And her quick thinking was the only reason Shepard was still alive, the only reason two years of hard work and billions of credits hadn’t gone to waste. Did that count for nothing? “Officially, it’s because in her current state, Shepard won’t accept Cerberus authority. Unofficially…”

Jacob waited for her to finish, and when she stayed silent, rubbed his chin. “I see. Are you going to tell Shepard about Rasa?”

She snorted. “Of course not.”

“Dishonesty hasn’t worked so far.”

“Neither has honesty.” She expelled a sigh. “Jacob, I’m not about to tell Shepard all our staff died so Rasa could steal her clone. What sort of reaction—”

The hatch slid open. Miranda closed her mouth and straightened as Commander Shepard stepped inside.

Her attire remained scrupulously free of Cerberus insignia. It made her look too casual for
command of the ship. Her hair was wet, though at least it was combed, and there was fresh
dressing on her wounds. So she’d been back in the shuttle bay, attempting to wear out her brand
new shoes. It was hardly Miranda’s fault she hadn’t had enough time to wake her properly, adjust
her to her new life. Unfair to blame her for it. But she hid her frustration well.

Miranda pitched her voice towards welcoming, though with a hint of preoccupation. “Shepard.
What can I do for you?”

Her eyes swept the room, taking in the details, lingering on a picture Miranda hung over her desk.
It was a quality print of a moderately famous painting, abstract, done in bold reds and yellows. But
Shepard didn’t comment. “Good. You’re both here. We need to discuss the ship’s capabilities,
and I’d like to run down our roster.”

“I can forward the relevant reports to your inbox.”

“Let’s start with the basics, then. How many crew aboard?”

Jacob cleared his throat. “Thirty-two souls aboard currently, counting us. We’ve got lodging for
three more, plus eight hot bunks that could double up.”

“That seems light.” Shepard’s doubt was predictable. Alliance frigates typically carried crews of
over forty, and were smaller than the SR-2.

Miranda sat back in her chair. “It’s amazing how an AI reduces the burden on human personnel. I
think you’ll be impressed by our efficiency.”

A shadow crossed Shepard’s face at the mention of EDI. However, she kept to topic—a notable
improvement. “What’s the minimum number needed to operate the ship?”

“Twelve,” Jacob said. “Though rotating the crew through a sleeping schedule would get hairy. I
wouldn’t want to run her skeleton crewed for more than a few weeks. We do two watches. I know
navy frigates run three to scrimp on bunks, but we don’t have that issue.”

She looked at him directly. “Miranda’s the executive officer. What’s your role here?”

He rolled his shoulder. “I run the armory and maintain the combat crew’s gear. Once we pick up
some more people, I’ll coordinate the squads, and provide command support to you and Miranda.”

“I’ll want dossiers on the both of you as well. I got surprised by Goto today, and I’d prefer that not
happen again. The briefs on the ship’s servers are light on detail, and for the moment, I’m more
interested in who I already have, rather than who I might recruit.”

Miranda experienced a twinge of resentment, but guarded it well. Shepard was hostile enough.
Miranda never saw the point of trusting other people, but that rarely prevented her from working
with them. Shepard obviously took a different view, and if she wanted this to be a smooth
relationship, she needed to allay her suspicions. “You’ll find them waiting at your terminal.”

“Good.” Shepard moved on to her next question. “What exactly are a Cerberus X.O.’s duties?
Aside from spying on me.”

Of course it was too much to expect the woman to thank her. “I’m the Illusive Man’s agent. You
and this ship represent his most valuable assets. My job is to make sure you succeed.”

“That’s it?”
“You might consider that Cerberus consists of quite a lot of people, very few of whom have ever wronged you, and those of us in Lazarus cell have done quite the opposite.”

Jacob made to interject. But Shepard rode right over him. “You organize in cells, but you’re not terrorists.”

“It’s just a word. We’re not the Alliance. We value agility and we keep all mission information strictly need-to-know, to protect our agents.” She kept her tone neutral, but refused to allow Shepard to continue to smear her life’s work, or the people she did it with. “Cerberus isn’t as evil as you believe. Ask me whatever you’d like. I’m happy to prove it.”

Jacob managed to get a word between them. “I’ll be the first to admit Cerberus has a checkered past. But this threat is real, and we can do something about it. You can’t pretend that’s worthless.”

Miranda continued, “Cerberus’ mission is and has always been the advancement of the human race. Surely we can all agree on the importance of that.”

Shepard glanced at them both, one after the other. Something like contempt touched her face. “We have very different ideas of what that means.”

That hung in the air. Jacob cleared his throat. “We’re all on the same side.”

Shepard eyed him for a moment like she had quite a lot to say on that subject, but maybe even she was sick of fighting, because instead she took the room’s unoccupied chair. “I’m concerned about the ship’s defenses. Specifically the kinetic barriers. I spent the afternoon reading up on the specs.”

Miranda’s protest was immediate. “Shepard, the ship’s brand new.”

“They aren’t state-of-the-art. Inadequate barriers cost me the original Normandy. Good isn’t good enough here. We need the best.”

She considered Shepard’s odd behavior since waking. They expected a certain degree of trauma, but perhaps Miranda had underestimated the influence of the attack itself, the physicality of Shepard’s death. “I assure you, our barriers can withstand whatever the Terminus can dish out.”

“We weren’t attacked by a standard ship. That thing cut through our defenses like cake over Alchera.” Shepard sat back and crossed her arms, stubborn to the last. “The reports can call it a geth ship all they like. It wasn’t. For all I know, it’s still at large.”

Maybe she should count herself lucky Shepard cared enough to want to preserve the ship. Miranda raised her hand, a gesture of acknowledgement. “I can’t imagine we’d be able to afford much. Our mission budget is generous but it was meant to cover logistics, not major upgrades.”

“I’m hoping to negotiate an alternative arrangement with a supplier.”

Jacob frowned. “What sort of arrangement?”

“I don’t know what tempts a hardware merchant in the Terminus, but I figure maybe an ex-spectre’s services will intrigue them enough to bargain.” She shrugged. “It’s worth a shot. If it doesn’t interfere with our primary mission.”

“Creative.” Jacob approved.
“I might have a few contacts,” Miranda said, reluctantly. She didn’t want to prolong their stay. Her last visit, two years prior, was less than pleasant.

“See if you can arrange a meeting.” Shepard stood and stretched. Her fingertips brushed the ceiling. “Send me the details when you have them.”

Miranda watched the hatch close behind her, and looked up at Jacob with pure exasperation. “Now she wants to refit the ship? Is nothing good enough for this woman?”

He folded his arms. “Want me to talk to her? Maybe I can find some common ground. I had my own doubts when I signed up. Still do, some days.”

She went back to her typing. “Do as you like. She’ll either come around, or the Illusive Man will have to rethink this mission.”
July 2185

Liara’s message came sooner than Alenko expected, less than two weeks after they met aboard the Cerberus derelict. It was short:

Kaidan,

I found the station. Meet me aboard Omega at your earliest convenience.

—Liara

He frowned. Traveling to the Terminus as a private citizen wasn’t illegal, strictly speaking, but given the sensitive nature of his position it was strongly discouraged. He would be debriefed when he returned, and it wasn’t like he could be honest about the reason. But he’d already concealed one trip this year and wasn’t keen to do it again. Lying to his colleagues rubbed him wrong.

In the end he decided to call it a family emergency. That was only a technical lie, not a real one. Both Liara and Nathaly were as close as family after everything they’d been through together.

Jackson pressed him only a little, and didn’t question it when he explained Liara needed his help. She was a career marine and understood that kind of bond, even if there wasn’t an acceptable way to call it out on a leave request form. He might have clued in Garrus, but he hadn’t heard from Garrus in months, and C-Sec claimed he quit. Tali didn’t know anything, either. Alenko remained concerned but for the moment he’d exhausted every lead.

So within only a few days, Alenko found himself aboard a transport headed to the notorious haven for mercs, criminals, and pirates, from where a lone marine and his archaeologist friend would launch their mission to infiltrate a secret Cerberus lab.

After he thought about it that way once, he tried not to think about it again. This whole plan was insane. But remembering Nathaly lying on that table, at the mercy of her captors— walking away and leaving her to face them helpless and alone— had haunted him for months. He had to try.

Liara had taken lodgings in the Tuhi district, a suite of rooms at one of the many small hotels crammed above shops, restaurants, and the other businesses that lined its narrow alleys, lit mainly by signage. Computer equipment in varying degrees of assembly was strewn across the living room. Alenko had to step carefully between a terminal screen and a tangle of cables to enter.

“Forgive me,” Liara said, hastily clearing a path. “I don’t like to be out of touch. An unfortunate side effect of my newest undertaking.”

“What’s that?” Alenko had encountered some real hardware hoarders in his time. This was on another level. And it was completely unlike Liara, who kept her lab aboard the Normandy neat as a pin.

“I’m registered as an information broker on Illium. My clients would be poorly served if my virtual presence disappeared for weeks at a time.”

For a moment he was confused, then understanding dawned. It explained the state of her flitter as well. “To look for your friend. The one who helped you find Nathaly’s… find Nathaly.”
“Yes,” she said, simply. “Can I get you anything? There’s a kitchen in here, somewhere.”

“Water, if it’s clean.”

Apparently she had similar misgivings about environmental controls aboard Omega. “I purified it myself. The ice as well.”

While she busied herself, he went to a large window overlooked the street, but Liara had the curtains drawn. It turned the room into a cave, where only the barest trickle of yellowed neon light made it inside. Omega was harsh on the eyes. No attention was paid to the comfort of its inhabitants, which were mainly low-paid or even enslaved miners back when the lighting was laid down, and continued to be mostly too poor to have time or energy for protests.

She fetched him a glass, and caught him peeking behind the drapes. “Not very scenic, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve only been here twice. And the second time was just the one night, with the Normandy.”

A fleeting smile crossed her face at the memory. “I confess I do not recall most of that evening.”

“You and me both.” He chuckled, and took a sip. “We woke up in some empty club around mid-morning with a janitor giving us a death glare. In hindsight, it’s kind of shocking we still had all our stuff.”

“I can’t imagine Shepard looks like an easy mark even when she’s passed out from drinking.”

“What, I don’t look scary enough?” But he grinned as he said it.

Liara’s brief burst of laughter faded. She grew pensive. “The last time I was here, I found Shepard and lost my friend. The asari name for this station means ‘heart of evil’.”

“The human name isn’t much better. Omega means the end of everything.” He gave her a sidelong glance. “I don’t like it, either.”

“We won’t have to stay long now that you’ve arrived.” Liara went to the sofa and opened a computer console stashed on the coffee table. “I got the location from a company specializing in apparatus for tissue replication.”

“Cloning,” he said, his stomach sinking. Miranda had provided compelling evidence the Nathaly in her lab was no clone, but how could he really know? This wasn’t his field.

Liara tried for reassuring. “I saw her remains, Kaidan. They could have gotten her DNA from anywhere. They went through the titanic effort of retrieving her because they wanted Shepard, not a copy. But I would be shocked if her treatment did not require cloned tissue.”

“Why did they want her?” That question, too, had stuck with him. None of the Cerberus personnel had given him more than the vaguest of answers. Because the Illusive Man wanted it done. Because humanity needed her. “The Alliance tracks Cerberus finances, as best we can, anyway. The Lazarus Project’s absorbed tens of billions of credits.”

“I don’t think all of that’s for her. My contact said he overheard references to a larger engineering project. Not biomedical.” Liara grimaced. “In any case, we got lucky. Cerberus lacked the expertise to install such unique equipment. So they allowed the manufacturer access to the facility.”

“When they brought me there, they didn’t let me know the destination.”
I had the same experience. But I daresay they had more leverage on us than their supplier. The
company in question had no motivation to risk their merchandise or personnel by agreeing to such
terms. Nor did Cerberus want to draw unnecessary attention to their station by being so secretive
with a supplier."

He shrugged, conceding the point. Walking to the couch, he peered over her shoulder at the map
on the screen. It showed all the major systems in this sector. A single dot lit up between them.
“That’s not in any known system.”

“It’s not in any system at all,” Liara said. She looked up at him with troubled eyes. “It’s in deep
space.”

He tried to conceal his disappointment. “Unless your contact had orbital data, we’ll never find it.”

“I know where to look.” She did not elaborate. “Are you prepared to leave, or do you need rest?”

“I’m ready.” He glanced around at her mass of computing equipment. “You know, I used to
design computer hardware for a living. Briefly, but still. Let me help you make something more
portable out of this mess.”

She gave him a small smile of appreciation. “I remember, from when we left Alchera. I don’t like
being tied to Illium, though the mobile setup has proven… problematic.”

“So let me give him a hand.”

“It’s really not necessary.” Liara eyed her gear, twisting her fingers together. “It has to come
together sooner or later.”

“I insist. It won’t even take more than a few hours. We can spare that.”

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Three days later, Alenko and Liara were in interstellar space, well beyond the heliopause of the
Tassrah System in Phoenix Massing. Alenko had spent plenty of time between systems. But he’d
always been on his way to somewhere else, cruising at FTL speeds. Never searching for a needle
in a haystack with the intrasystem drive. The deep black of the void and stately pace of Liara’s
flitter made him feel exposed, vulnerable. Adrift. The galaxy became as big and empty as it truly
was, and his mammalian brain shrank before it.

Nathaly had gotten stuck in batarian space with a busted FTL drive about a year before they met.
She rarely spoke of it. Alenko understood why, but he lacked an appreciation for just how lonely it
felt way out here, without the comfort of the plasma wash across the ports or an approaching
destination on their nav console, and how hopeless. Even Liara’s presence only took the edge off.
He wished he could tell her that he understood now, a little bit better. Maybe soon he would.

Liara herself seemed more apprehensive about their mission than their circumstances. “I’ve been
sweeping this sector since this morning. We should have caught sight of the station by now. Or at
least overheard its chatter.”

No space station, even secret ones, operated in radio silence. It was impossible to function without
sampling the environment, at the very least. Attenuation tended to take care of that problem unless
you knew where to look. And Liara said she knew where to look.

Alenko tried to be gentle. “The station’s moved at least half a billion kilometers since I was there.
God knows how many since your contact visited. That’s not a trivial search area.”
“My contact’s approach had to match the station’s orbital velocity about the galactic core,” she snapped back, irritated. “He remembered the numbers roughly. Good enough for dead reckoning. Something’s wrong.”

There wasn’t a co-pilot seat, not on a craft this tiny, but over the last few days Alenko had linked most of the flitter’s systems into Liara’s computing network, a distraction from boredom and his rising anxiety about this trip. “Do you have millimeter wave radar?”

“Yes, but the range is limited.”

“The resolution’s better.” He queried her systems, looking for the controls. “Look, we should be on top of the station, right?”

She pursed her lips. “We’d see it now if that were the case. What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” he said, honestly. “More of a gut feeling.”

Her mouth quirked at that. “Shepard would approve.”

They both knew Shepard operated primarily off her instincts rather than reason or facts. But it undeniably worked for her.

Alenko found the system and activated the scanner. It was a long several minutes as they waited for results, limited by the speed of light. Then small blips lit up like comm buoys, scattered in a cone directly in front of the flitter.

Liara frowned. “I don’t understand. None of these indications is large enough to be a station.”

“But too large for cosmic junk.” Outside solar systems, the galactic vacuum was bare. Finding a concentration of objects like this couldn’t be coincidence. “Move in close. Careful.”

Liara gauged the speed of the anomalies and matched it as they approached, to minimize the risk of collisions. Her eyes widened. “Goddess.”

The flitter’s lights illuminated a graveyard of broken wreckage, starkly shadowed in their limited beams. Alenko’s heart sank down between his boots. They had found Lazarus Station.

Liara was stupefied. “I don’t understand. This can’t… what could have done this?”

“Cerberus makes a lot of enemies.” But the words were limpid at best. His eyes searched the ruins, hoping as she did that this wasn’t what it seemed, that somewhere beyond this they’d find the intact station, Nathaly safe aboard.

“Look, over there.” She pointed, turning the flitter. “That section avoided most of the damage.”

Indeed, a large piece floated relatively undisturbed. Alenko recognized it as the apex of the station. “That was Miranda’s office. We might be able to recover some of the project data.”

“If any of it was stored locally.” Liara steered them towards it. “Miranda invited you to the station.”

It wasn’t a question. “Yes.”

“I’m not surprised. She was fanatic in her duty, and fiercely loyal to Cerberus. She’d take any advantage she could get.”
“Why did you leave Nathaly with her?” It slipped out, accusatory, before he could stop himself.

“As I’ve explained, I had few other choices.” Liara glanced back him, defensive, with only the barest hint of remorse. “But also because Miranda is brilliant, and devoted body and soul to her mission. If anyone had a chance of success, it was her. She’s not unlike Shepard in that.”

“Aside from her chosen cause,” he replied, darkly, making it clear what he thought of her Cerberus devotion.

“There is light and dark in everything.” Liara’s face was in shadows, the only light from the flitter’s headlamps. “Nothing is simplistic. Losing my mother taught me that much.”

There was no decent response to that. He turned his attention back to the port.

They approached the remnants of Miranda’s quarters. Alenko brought his hardsuit, and climbed into it now, fastening his helmet into place in anticipation of an EVA. Liara simply buttoned up her modified lab suit and added head gear to provide pressure and oxygen. He suppressed a moment’s envy— Alliance hardsuits boasted exceptional defenses, but weren’t comfortable enough to live in. Obviously Liara’s custom-built asari equipment had circumvented that difficulty.

They drew up alongside the wreckage and extended the magnetic tether. Liara handed him a personal tether and secured her own. “Ready?”

“Let’s move.” He threw out the tether and tugged it once. It was tacked securely to the hull.

Alenko felt the prickle of a mass effect field as they moved out of the hatch. All biotics were sensitive to such things, to greater or lesser degrees. Fine or subtle effects had always proved more difficult for him. So he sensed this small barrier, an extravagance to prevent depressurization when the hatch opened, as only a minor irritation, like a faint and passing itch. The field was an upgrade since he last saw Liara. Her infobroker business must be prospering.

He also brought his sidearm, but didn’t feel compelled to draw it in these circumstances. Instead, he let the glow of his omni-tool light his way as they penetrated deeper into the wreckage.

Liara abruptly broke the silence ten minutes into the tedious work. “Did you see Shepard?”

“Yes.” He thought about what she was really asking, and found it difficult to form a reply. “There were so many tubes...”

Liara gave him a startled glance. He barely noticed. In his mind Nathaly lay splayed out on that table, warm to the touch, but dead to it as well— completely unresponsive when he held her hand, said her name. Nothing but an EEG to show any brain activity at all. Her blue eyes staring aimlessly at nothing at all.

He cleared his throat, looked down. “They had her laid out like meat on a slab. Tubes in her veins, her heart, going into her torso and who knows where from there. Electrodes in her muscles. She was a mess of wiring.”

Liara didn’t speak for the better part of thirty seconds. “Was she breathing?”

He was almost as long answering. “Yes.”

Together, they shifted the last of the debris and found themselves looking at Miranda’s desk. It was oddly preserved. None of the damage from the explosive attack, or the subsequent ejection
from the main body of the station, had penetrated here. Alenko reckoned the apex of the ovoid protected it. That was a strong structure, difficult to damage.

Liara went immediately to Miranda’s terminal. “There’s no power.”

“I brought a line from the ship.” He held up his hand, showing the thin wire. It was a minute’s work to get it hooked up, and power on the system.

Liara interfaced with it directly while Alenko linked in his omni-tool. He set a background process to automatically copy all of the data it could find from the ruins of the station, while he conducted more targeted searches. Neither of them spoke much. They were both avoiding any mention of the obvious, that whatever fate befell this station, Nathaly surely shared in it.

He stumbled on an audio log, recorded in Miranda Lawson’s pronounced Australian accent. It was rare enough in the colonies that Alenko doubted it could belong to anyone else aboard. “Listen to this.”

He played it for Liara: “Progress is slow, but subject shows signs of recovery. Major organs are again functional, and there are signs of rudimentary neurological activity. In an effort to accelerate the process, we’ve moved from simple organic reconstruction to bio-synthetic fusion. Initial results show promise.”

Liara let out a breath. “They were fixing her in any way they could.”

Alenko’s mind went back to the strange device he found in the Cerberus lab. Medical, he’d said, when Cook asked what it did. With a sinking feeling he dived deeper into the directory containing this log file, ran a cross check, and soon found confirmation.

He stared at the schematic. There, laid out in clear language any engineer could read, was the device. Jointed like a trilobite and made of strong metal, because it was intended to screw into the spinal column, replacing two vertebrae. Those medusa fibers connected to cybernetic implants which in turn interfaced with the patient’s original nerves, bridging a stubborn gap even the best of modern medicine found difficult to heal.

Another log, this one written, noted “the subject” suffered a “complete spinal cord injury”, likely posthumous, as her body played billiards with the Normandy debris field. Alenko looked it up, and found this meant Nathaly’s spinal cord had been completely severed in the collision, and surmised this device was meant to replace the damaged section. He’d held one small piece of the technology Cerberus implanted to repair her without even knowing it.

He hated thinking of her like that. Broken like a rag doll, with metal and wires bolted throughout her body. Nobody ever asked him if he wanted an implant. Though he was glad of it now, he’d been all of sixteen when they opened up his head and shoved a prototype into his brain. He was damn lucky the worst of it was migraines— others had not been so fortunate. He couldn’t begin to imagine what all this experimental artifice would have done to her.

To say nothing of how strange that medical device made him feel, when he stared at it too long.

“They took her to pieces,” he said out loud, not even fully aware of his intent to speak until the words escaped.

“They were healing her,” Liara emphasized.

Alenko was stricken. He left her like this. “They parsed her down to salvaged parts and patched the rest with experimental tech and artificial implants.”
Liara cued up another of Miranda’s audio logs. “Listen.”

“Physical reconstruction of subject is complete, but we still need to evaluate all mental and neurological functions. Our orders were clear: make Commander Shepard who she was before the explosion—the same mind, the same morals, the same personality. If we alter her identity in any way, if she’s somehow not the woman she used to be, the Lazarus project will have failed. I refuse to let that happen.”

“They wanted to restore her,” Liara insisted. “Shepard, not some construct. Not some golem, or a clone. They changed her body. Not her.”

“You don’t know any of this worked.” Alenko had to fight down a rising sense of near-hysteria. At his complacency in this, his own helplessness—what was he supposed to do, kill her himself? At the realization that they’d been so close to succeeding and now Lazarus Station was wreckage, and Shepard with it. That there was absolutely nothing he could do about any awful part of it.

Liara had a kind of panic on her face. “This was never what I intended. I never thought we’d lose her again.”

“You had no idea what Cerberus wanted.” Alenko’s mouth moved without him. “You had no damn idea what they’d do to her. Whether they’d protect her, or hurt her, or use her. And you gave her to them anyway. To people who already tried to kill her once in the name of an experiment.”

“This was nothing like Akuze—”

“This was exactly like Akuze.” He didn’t care that he could see the words cutting into her as he spoke them, louder with each syllable. “They had no plan here. Just test after test after test until something worked. Cerberus doesn’t advance science. They pervert it. It’s all they know. You let them pervert her, too.”

She raised her voice. Liara never raised her voice. But now she was practically yelling, inducing static over his comm. “I loved her. She was my dearest friend. Wasn’t it worth trying? Are you happier without her here?”

“You knew how she felt about this. You heard her when we found that dead kid hooked up life support aboard the Worthington. ‘This is the worst way to die,’ that was exactly what she said—”

“And what did you do?” Liara shot back. “Did you give her what she wanted, or did you let Cerberus carry on?”

He could still feel Nathaly’s hand in his, the last time he held it before he walked out of Lazarus Station, and out of her life for the last time. He looked away, his throat thick. Took a breath and then another. “We have to find her. We can’t leave her to scavengers again.”

Liara took the flitter and searched the wreckage while Alenko continued to download files off the remains of the station’s servers from Miranda’s office. It was a necessary distance to cool their argument. And for Alenko, her task was too close to the Normandy wreck—nosing through the debris with Joker, looking for the main antenna, uncertain if he was more terrified they wouldn’t find her, or that they would.

The desk terminal contained piles of data. Experimental reports, defenses, comm logs from other Cerberus outposts, even financial records, the kind that would take months if not years to fully process. More than his counterterrorism squad back aboard the Citadel had found in a year. It
brought him no pleasure.

With every report, every log, every dossier and medical blueprint, an overwhelming tide grew inside him, until Alenko found he couldn’t breathe.

He left her here, to die like this, a living vegetable, surrounded by tubes and wires and mortal enemies. Not doing her job, the way she wanted it to happen. Not after a long, full life, surrounded by friends and family, the way it should have happened. No, it happened here. In the frigid reaches of interstellar space, to a faceless missile, an explosion in the dark. Alone.

Oh, god, he should have never left her here.

He was in his suit. In his helmet. He couldn’t do anything as the records flickered by except float over the desk while his face grew wet.

Liara returned just as his omni-tool completed its copy. He cut off his imagination and closed the terminal. Forced himself to speak normally, past the boulder-sized lump in his throat. “Did you find anything?”

She shook her head. “All organic remnants are… not intact, according to my sensors. But I pieced together what happened.”

He couldn’t honestly say that he cared anymore. But he asked, for the look of the thing, and because it bought him a few more minutes to calm down before they had to go back inside. “What’s that?”

“I found a disconnected system. Security logs.” She began transferring the data. “Among the last recorded events are anomalies among the defense mechs. Somebody reprogrammed them.”

He blinked. Forgot himself for a moment and looked directly at her. “They attacked the station crew?”

Liara stared at the ruins of his face. “Kaidan, what—”

He cut her off. “It’s nothing. The mechs attacked the crew?”

“Apparently so.” She showed him another log. “A week or so after that, the station recorded several inbound missiles. Station defenses made no attempt to counter the attack. Almost like a destruction protocol.”

“You think Cerberus destroyed their own station.”

“Maybe the project ended. They were so close.” Hope lit her face. “Shepard could still be alive. They could have evacuated, and then destroyed the station to cover their tracks.”

Alenko said nothing. It was so obviously over. Liara clung to optimism, but the far likelier explanation was somebody staged an attack with the mechs, maybe an inside job, and Cerberus destroyed all evidence of their operation here. Nothing suggested any other scenario.

But right now, just the thought of saying that out loud made him ill. He left her here, to face this alone, helpless and defenseless. Just like he left her on the ship while it burned.

Liara pressed her point. “If so, I would expect a proper clean-up crew to arrive shortly. We need
to leave.”

“Fine.” He was more than ready to put this station to his back, and made for the flitter. Liara followed. He could feel the worry wafting off her, but he couldn’t begin to speak.

Nathaly had died here, for some measure of death. And now there was no sign of her.

Just like over Alchera, when he left her corpse circling the planet with their ship. Like she’d vanished. After that, getting himself to accept she wasn’t simply lost somewhere, waiting to come home, had been an uphill battle. His brain couldn’t comprehend what it hadn’t seen, not when the truth was that awful. He’d barely survived it.

And now here he was again, facing it a second time. How was that even possible?

They retracted their magnetic tethers and made for Omega. Once they were back in FTL, Liara broke the silence. “I also found this.”

She reached into her pocket and withdrew an OSD. Alenko took it, brow furrowed.

Liara pointed at the flitter’s main console. “You can plug it in there.”

“What is it?” he asked, inserting it to the appropriate slot.

“Old files. I found them in a partially-destroyed cloning laboratory. Some are dated nearly ten years ago.”

He navigated through the data. His eyebrows climbed up into his hair. “Project Osiris.”

Liara blinked. “You know it?”

“I’ve heard of it.” He sifted through the data she collected, glad of the distraction, but increasingly troubled. “It was an Alliance project. After I left the Agincourt, I got debriefed about a Dr. Farrell I... met on my last mission. It had the navy’s full attention. The officer conducting the interview mentioned Osiris, and implied Nathaly was involved in some way.”

“She was a subject.” Liara pulled up a roster. “Here. Along with a number of other special operations personnel.”

Her name stood out. Alenko forced himself to read through the rest of the list, recognizing Commander Laine as well, and a handful of others. Jackson was not on the list. Maybe she’d gotten her N7 commission later, or just got lucky. “Look. Armistan Banes is here, too. And some other woman from SAMI, Harker Dyson.”

There was something familiar about Dyson’s face, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. She had a russet complexion, a face a little more interesting than beautiful, and addressed the camera with such confidence it bordered on aggression. “Says she’s a biotic. You’d think that would throw off their data.”

Liara spoke. “Banes led to finding Admiral Kahoku’s men dead on that planet full of thresher maws.”

“Yeah. And that led us straight to Cerberus.” Alenko continued to browse the documents. “Osiris collected all kinds of biometric and psychological data.”

“It’s no surprise Cerberus would want every last piece of Shepard’s personal data archives,
considering their undertaking.” Liara paused. “I don’t see any mention of Farrell, but here’s a reference to a Dr. Archer associated with the project.”

Alenko glanced at the staff photo, and let out a curse. “That’s him. That’s Farrell. Damn, she said he went by different names.”

“I guess this is how Cerberus knew him.” Liara looked up. “I take it you didn’t see him when you were here.”

He shook his head, once. “Maybe he’d already left by then.”

“Or Miranda hid him from you.” Liara pulled up more data. “Who is he?”

“A Cerberus operative who infiltrated the Alliance intelligence ministry. I helped capture him.”

His face reddened with remembered shame. He still hadn’t attempted to recreate the biotic maneuver he used to tear Farrell apart, not even in practice. It bothered him that he couldn’t. He worried without understanding it, it would always remain outside his control, waiting to hurt someone else.

To mitigate the embarrassment, he moved on quickly. “Farrell— Archer— attempted to recruit me. Maybe that’s how Miranda got my name.”

“Maybe. Though I doubt she would have invited you without knowing your affection for Shepard.” Liara clicked into a new directory. “What— oh, goddess.”

Alenko peered at the screen. “What the hell—”

She swallowed. “Evidently, Cerberus allowed him to continue his research. And expand considerably.”

“That would explain the need for so many people, if Cerberus is behind the colony abductions.”

His stomach churned. “He’s looking into biotic subjects now, too. Look, here.”

He pointed at a particular record. Liara leaned in to read. “It says… it says biotic nervous systems may allow more functional interfaces. Interfaces with what?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I want to know.” Unfortunately, as a graduate of Brain Camp, his imagination didn’t need much help. Their so-called teachers always made sure they knew it could be worse. He’d spent a lot of nights in his bunk staring up into the dark, and picturing what worse would be like.

Liara ejected the OSD. “Let me make a copy, and you can take this back with you.”

They spoke rarely on the return journey. Occasionally, Liara logged into her gear to address client needs back on Illium. Alenko didn’t have even that much to occupy him. Instead, he dwelled on what-ifs. Imagining Nathaly carted from one procedure to the next. By Miranda’s plan, around now they should have started to bring her out of the medical coma to semi-consciousness, determine what remained of her brain function. Wondering if they’d tried to wake her at all, or just plugged her drugged mind directly into an indoctrination protocol, brainwashing her to Cerberus’ will. Such things had been done before. Was that how she spent her last days, being made into a puppet?

Why he hadn’t pressed the extremely vital point of what Cerberus wanted with her, how they intended to use her once they had her back? Maybe he should have stayed. Maybe sacrificing his morality and honor to keep her safe was the best decision after all. Maybe if he had…
Now he’d never know.

In fact, Liara didn’t broach the subject until they arrived at Omega’s docks, and sat down for their first fresh meal in a week. Apparently she’d given their findings some thought. “We need to make contact with Cerberus.”

Alenko hadn’t touched his food. He looked up at her blankly. She pressed on. “If Shepard survived, surely they would have no reason not to tell us. We both have resources that could be invaluable to their operation. And more of Shepard’s trust than they could hope to win so quickly alone.”

He shook his head. “No.”

Liara was derailed. “Pardon?”

“No,” he said again. “Liara, it’s over. She’s gone.”

She half rose from her seat. “You can’t know that. I don’t know that.”

“Miranda told me they’d wake her up in October, at the earliest. That’s months from now. Months of healing she didn’t have.” He couldn’t believe Liara, of all people, was forcing him to have this conversation. To say the obvious out loud. “And god knows how long that station’s been in pieces.”

“By all means, I should have remembered medical innovation moves along a predictable timeline.”

“It’s not just that.” Alenko leaned down onto the table, his forehead in his hand. “We haven’t heard from her.”

Liara stiffened. “That’s hardly material—”

“Of course it’s material.” His hand came down on the table hard enough to rattle the plates. Liara jumped. “The only way Nathaly survived that kind of attack is if she was fully conscious, up and moving around. Could you imagine, in your wildest dreams, that she wouldn’t contact us?”

She pursed her lips. Sank back into her chair. “Perhaps Cerberus…”

“Think of who you’re talking about. Would Nathaly let them stop her? If she was herself?”

“We can’t lose hope,” she said, all by pleading.

He shook his head. “I’m done. I can’t.”

“Surely you don’t mean that.”

“She’s died so many times.” His voice almost broke. First he left her in the battery and watched the ship explode around her. Then he found Joker’s escape shuttle, without her inside. Then the hour passed when her suit would no longer be able to filter her air, the last possible hope of finding her alive.

Then her funeral. Then some months later the Normandy investigation closed and declared her killed in action, with such officious finality that he thought might be the end of it.

But no. The navy forced the surviving crew to appear in a media broadcast on the first anniversary of the attack, to drum up support and interest. Garrus and Liara and all their other well-intentioned friends just had to keep asking how he was. Cerberus returned to his life, claiming they could
fulfill a burning wish he’d carried for a year and a half, to just see her alive one more time.

They didn’t lie. They just weren’t fast enough. And now that hope, too, was dead. It died in a blaze of incoming missiles and subverted mechs, in the wreckage of a station, in the dark of deep space. In a little white room where Shepard lived out her final hours, far from home.

He looked up at Liara, battered and broken. “I can’t do it. I just can’t anymore.”

She reached across the table and covered his hand with her own. “We can’t give up.”

“She’s dead, Liara.” It was the first time in two years he’d said it out loud, just that plainly. “Nathaly is dead and she’s not coming back. This distraction with Cerberus is a just another wasted hope.”

“They were so close.” Her face crumbled. “Kaidan, please.”

He withdrew his hand. “It’s over. We tried. We both tried. We need to let her rest now.”

“You can’t be serious.” She was coming undone now, herself. “She would never let us go.”

“I’ll miss her the rest of my life.” He meant every word. His arms stretched out across the table again, grasping both of hers. She crumpled at his touch. “But wishing doesn’t make things true. Lazarus Station is gone. Nathaly is gone. We’re not helping anyone, least of all her. God, she would never want us to go on like this. We’ve already done too much.”

Liara watched him for what seemed an eternity. Then she sat back, blinking rapidly, her eyes large and wet. She stared off into the crowd. “We all come to a place where we have to set down our burdens or be crushed.”

A shiver went down his spine. He’d said those exact words to Nathaly after Ash died. But Liara wasn’t in that conversation. Nathaly wouldn’t have told her, and he certainly hadn’t. There was no way she could know…

Liara turned back and met his eyes. For just the space of that moment, she could have been Benezia, boring into him with every ounce of her mother’s eternal, dangerous grace. “I forgive you. I know you’ve done your best, and you would never forget her.” Then it fell away. She took a deep, heaving breath, just one. “But I’m sorry. I don’t agree. I have to keep trying. I’ll carry her alone if I must.”

She got up and left the table before he could say anything more. He watched her leave, moving with a stately calm. Then, feeling empty and hollowed out down to his marrow, he dragged himself toward the ticketing booths, and bought passage back to the Citadel.

The journey took four days. True to their word, his friends had adequately outfitted his apartment two years ago. More than adequately. From the distinctly Scandinavian styling he guessed they’d given Mat’s husband free reign on design. Everything had a bit of life on it now, but it still felt more like furnished rental than his own things, his own home. He wondered without caring much if that would ever change.

Alenko dropped his bag by the door and made some coffee. Though it occasionally triggered a migraine, he was still fond of the taste, and after Lazarus Station even such a small comfort felt entirely necessary.

He wandered through that slightly alien living room, sipping idly from the mug, too wrung out to think much. The pictures at least were his. And the books, the occasional houseplant. The couch,
because the one Alex picked had cushions like granite boulders. The flag in a wooden frame on

top of the shelf.

Alenko set down his coffee, and picked it up, fingers brushing over the glass. Stared at it for some
time. For once not remembering the funeral or reliving those last minutes on the Normandy, or
drowned in guilt, but just letting himself sit with the old ache, for as long as he needed.

Then he found a box, and put the flag in there and the picture from Abael next to it, and got her
jacket out of the closet and put that away, too. After some thought, he added a few more pictures
from the walls— not every one he had of her, but the ones that were only her, or only them
together. The box got put away on the closet shelf in the spare bedroom he’d converted to an
office, up high with the other things he needed only rarely.

He closed the door. There was a long moment’s keening sadness as if his heart was breaking all
over again, and then he felt twenty pounds lighter. A part of him would always love her, and that
same part would always miss her, but he didn’t need to give it his full attention anymore. At long
last, he knew what became of Nathaly, and he could finally let her rest. That story was over.

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“Look who the cat dragged in,” Jackson drawled, when Alenko presented himself for work the
following day. Then she really took him in. “You look like hell.”

He was in no mood for her light-hearted jabs. He spent most of his trip back deciding what to do
with the data he acquired, thinking over his options, debating how to handle this conversation.
Nathaly might be gone, but the Lazarus records could still help the living. She’d want that.

He took a breath. “I know what Lazarus Cell was doing.”

Her easy smile faded. “What?”

Alenko laid an OSD on her desk. He’d carefully pruned out any mention of Shepard’s identifiers.
“They were engaged in a prolonged undertaking to determine how to return a dead human being to
life.”

She stared at it, and then at him. “And you just happened by this information?”

“This was the emergency.” He folded his arms. “My friend had a run-in with Lazarus. We found
their station destroyed and mined what records were left.”

“Lazarus cell is gone?” Jackson was floundering. He’d rarely seen her so nonplussed. “Tens of
billions of credits just wiped out?”

“I’m not sure. But the biomedical part of their work was destroyed. There’s evidence they might
have built a ship, for an unknown purpose, at a different site.”

Jackson looked at his face, then plugged in the OSD. Her computer flashed a warning almost
instantly. “Someone tampered with these files.”

“That would be me.” He overrode her immediate objections. “I removed the experimental
subject’s identity. It was a condition of bringing the data here.”

Alenko didn’t mention it was his condition, rather than Liara’s. Jackson pursed her lips. “You
know who it was?”
Some time had passed, and he was able to maintain a level of impassivity. “She wouldn’t have appreciated being used like this. I won’t let her memory be tainted by this work. And her identity has nothing to do with the data.”

Jackson stood up. Though somewhat shorter than Alenko, she radiated authority—and disapproval. “Naturally, their choice of subject for this rather extraordinary course of treatment wouldn’t reveal anything about their motives or future plans.”

Alenko lifted his chin. Jackson continued, icily. “Your unilateral decision to conceal this intelligence will in no way impede our mission against Cerberus, nor will it foster unforeseen consequences that may endanger our team.”

He folded his hands behind his back. “I understand. Any consequences will be on me.”

“No,” she said, sharply. “They won’t. You can’t know that.”

They stared each other down. Her anger was palpable, but she had nothing on Shepard’s sheer force of presence. He didn’t blink. Jackson said, “Commander Alenko, I am ordering you to provide the unedited data.”

“Respectfully, no.” He’d destroyed his only copy, in any case.

“You’re refusing the order.”

“I am.” He held out his wrists. “You want to cuff me or should I just walk myself upstairs?”

Jackson was annoyed. It showed on her face. But she was also pragmatic. “And that’s all you changed?”

“You have my word.”

She evaluated him a long moment, speculative, and then turned back to the OSD and its cache of data.

Alenko relaxed and cleared his throat. “There’s something else.”

“What?” She was distracted, watching the files populate on her screen. “There’s almost a terabyte here. This is going to take months to analyze.”

“I took a preliminary look. Most of the staff are presumed dead from the attack on the station. But one of them was already reassigned.”

Jackson raised her eyebrows. “I take it I’ll recognize this individual?”

“You remember Jeffrey Farrell? The Cerberus prisoner from a few years ago?”

Her look sharpened. Alenko leaned over her desk and went to a file, showing records of staff boarding and departing the station. “That’s his picture, there. Somehow, he got from SAMI back to Cerberus, and he was integral to this project, working under the name Gavin Archer. He’s everywhere in these files.”

“Why the hell would an AI specialist get pulled into a… a…” She fumbled for the correct word.

“A true Lazarus project?” Alenko raised his eyebrows.

“Yes.”
“I wondered that, too.” He brought up a different record.

Jackson straightened, peering at the data. “That’s an Alliance black ops file. How—”

“Archer kept a copy. This project was codenamed Osiris.” Every word came out hard. Factual. Because if Alenko let himself think about what was in those files, the rage would rise again. “Ostensibly, its objective was to improve combat VIs by studying human soldiers. But if you look at Archer’s notes, it’s clear he had a different aim.”

And Alenko left Nathaly in his care. Unwittingly, maybe. But that was his fault for not looking closer when he had the chance. For wanting so badly to believe she could live that he let Cerberus run the show.

Jackson paged through the file, skimming, growing more confused. “He wanted to create combat-ready, computer-assisted, human-machine hybrids? What, like cyborgs? Is this for real?”

“According to the file, he’d already begun, before he left the Alliance.”

“The project was shut down,” she observed. “Not even spooks have the stomach for that.”

Alenko didn’t comment. “What’s worse is he took all of that data with him when he left. Logs say the Illusive Man wanted him in a separate lab, where he could focus on unlocking the full potential of his research, and that’s why he left Lazarus. Maybe to continue where he left off in ‘83. But he’d need test subjects.”

Jackson absorbed this, and then let out a thick stream of curses and opened a port on her comm.
Omega made for a shitty afterlife.

The station was a tunnel-riddled asteroid, long since mined out of its most profitable materials, though rumor had it desperate scavengers could still be found in the darkest interior, scraping at the rock with spoons and broken struts and their own fingernails for any whisper of eezo they could sell. Shepard grew up on stations, and was more than familiar with their own peculiar breed of ghost stories. The long-dead mechanic trapped outside, pounding on the hull to get in. That particular airlock with the flickering lights and the random drops in pressurization, rumored to be the final resting place of a worker crushed between sections when the station was built. The kind of things kids told each other by the glow of an omni-tool after sneaking somewhere they shouldn’t. The kind of thing adults wouldn’t admit to believing. Though, perhaps for the same reason, Omega’s made her shiver.

It certainly wasn’t hard to imagine the distant tap-tap-tap of shovels against stone in the deep shadows of the concourse beyond the docks. Garish neon signs, eye-watering in their glare, provided most of the illumination, augmented here and there by the pinprick of an LED, stars in the artificial night. The claustrophobic whole of it barely alleviated by the occasional glimpse of the towers beyond, grown out of the stone like filaments and winking in the abyss.

People jostled them as they left the tube. Salesmen leered from their kiosks, anything and everything on offer here. Some of the crowd was in a ribald mood, a little too loud as they bartered across the battered counters for whatever vice would keep their artificial cheer going just a little longer. But most hustled along, stoic and resigned and with their hand to a sidearm, keeping to themselves and making little conversation.

Worst of all was the stench. Burnt rock, broken air filters, stagnant water, and a faint foul musk Shepard had come to associate, over many years of military service, with large populations of batarians. They had sensitive noses, and she understood that to another batarian, the smell was quite comforting. Well, they probably said the same about humans. God knew she’d smelled her share of rank marines.

Again, something in her hindbrain twitched, something instinctively wrong, but it was gone as soon as it came, leaving her vaguely unsettled. This whole station had her hackles up. She made an attempt to settled herself and activated her comm. “EDI, can you tell us where to find the ship merchants? I saw a shipyard on our approach.”

“There are no consolidated maps of Omega, Shepard.” EDI rarely added any emotional inflection to her voice, in a way that was both flatter and keener than a VI. She had none of their engineered subservience. It was obvious she spoke as she did out of choice. “However, by triangulation, if you continue two degrees circumferentially and proceed outward radially, you should arrive in the vicinity of the shipyard.”

Miranda cocked her head. “I’ve been to this sector before. There’s plenty of ship tech to be found.”

“Excellent.” She nodded to Jacob. “You go with Kasumi and see if you can drum up any rumors. If anyone’s seen Solus, they’ll turn up here.”
Jacob made a noise of assent. Miranda pursed her lips. “We do have another dossier aboard station. Archangel, the mercenary captain. We should spend at least a little time locating him.”

“Finding our salarian takes priority over unvetted recruits.” Cerberus thought Archangel could provide tactical expertise. Shepard snorted to herself. She’d be cold in the ground before she needed that sort of help from a small-time gang leader.

Miranda clearly wasn’t happy, but made no further objection. Shepard glanced at Jacob. “Radio if you learn any—”

A salarian sidled up to her. “You’re new to Omega, yes?”

To human ears, salarian voices had a high, nasal quality not unlike cats, and this one was speaking quite loudly. Shepard winced. He steepled his fingers. “I can always tell—”

A batarian man strolled up behind him, frowning furiously. The salarian stumbled back a step. “Oh, ah, hello, Moklan, I—”

“Leave, Fargut,” Moklan said, in a low baritone rumble. “Now.”

“Right. I’m going. Whatever she wants.” His feet couldn’t move fast enough. Shepard watched him go, her eyes narrowed.

Moklan continued as though nothing had happened. “Welcome to Omega… Shepard.”

She refused to be surprised. She had a few new scars, sure, but not enough to render her unrecognizable. Her face was well-known before her death and it was bound to happen eventually. “What do you want?”

“Aria wants to know what brings a dead spectre to Omega. I suggest you go to Afterlife and present yourself.”

Shepard had been threatened by some real experts in her time. This guy was going for the promise approach—all calm certainty. But he didn’t have the knack. “Noted.”

Moklan read it correctly as “fuck off”. His scowl grew. “Nobody keeps Aria waiting.”

“It’ll be a learning experience for her, then.”


Her mouth turned up at the corner. He spun on his heel and departed, muttering darkly. To her squad, Shepard asked, “Aria’s who I think she is?”

“The queen of Omega,” Kasumi intoned, with a zestful delight. “She doesn’t usually trouble herself with tourists. I suppose returning from the dead would garner some attention.”

“Omega doesn’t have any government.” Shepard crossed her arms and sighed. “It’s the whole supposed appeal of the place. No rules, no limits, as if being under the thumb of whatever ruthless bastard’s on top in your neighborhood this week is better.”

Jacob shrugged. “Everyone thinks it’ll be their turn to be the ruthless bastard sooner or later.”

“Aria T’Loak comes closest to an official leader.” Miranda tapped her fingers against her hip. “She could be a good source of information.”
“Only if we’re out of other options.” Shepard didn’t appreciate being coerced. Maybe if her messenger asked politely. They resumed walking.

“Spurn royalty at your peril, Shep.” Kasumi raised her eyes ahead. “There’s a good tech market not far from here. I’d like to visit if we have the time.”

Jacob snorted. “You were just on the Citadel.”

She gave him a cheeky smile. “They don’t carry everything. Top-end encryption crackers are so hard to find.”

“Getting back to the point,” Shepard said. “Kasumi and Jacob, work the market for rumors about our salarian doc.”

Kasumi took his arm with inordinate glee. Jacob looked resigned. “Yes, ma’am.”

They set off towards the ramshackle array of shops. Shepard addressed her X.O. “Miranda, you’ve got the shipyard.”

The tone of her reply was perfectly natural. “And where will you be, Commander?”

Miranda only used her military rank when she was well and truly annoyed. Shepard ignored her irritation. “I have a few errands to run.”

“It’s been a long time since your accident. It might be best if you allowed me to accompany you.”

Shepard rankled. “I don’t need a handler.”

Miranda squared her shoulders. “I’m trying to be nice about this. Your present emotional state isn’t unlike culture shock, combined with the trauma of living through a devastating shipwreck followed by a major medical event. You shouldn’t be alone in a strange place right now.”

She glanced into her face, a biting comeback already rising, but for once she saw only sincerity. Shepard chose a different tact. “Miranda, if I don’t get some space to clear my head, everyone is going to learn a new definition of trauma. I’ll meet you at the shipyard later.”

It seemed she might argue, but all she offered was a curt nod. “As you like. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you become overwhelmed.”

And then, abruptly, Shepard found herself truly alone and unmonitored for the first time in over two years. The realization ran through her in a heady rush, leaving her giddy. This was the largest port of call in the Terminus Systems. She could walk away right now, put Cerberus at her back, and resume whatever kind of life she wanted. Nobody was here to stop her.

Somehow, just knowing she had a choice made everything lighter. She started walking.

She was set for armor, the one thing Cerberus got right in this whole mess. It was even detailed properly with N7 insignia. Not wanting to misrepresent the navy not currently employing her, Shepard considered removing it, but damn it, she’d done downright impossible things to earn that commendation. She couldn’t bring herself to throw it away. But she was less than satisfied with her armaments, with these ridiculous thermal clips, and if nothing else, Omega boasted plenty of gun shops.

After she got laughed out of the third one in a row, she sought outside help. “EDI, are you there?”
“I am always here, Shepard.”

“I’m looking for a store that still carries rifles with permanent heat sinks. Can you help me out?”

“Those models were completely phased out from most markets within a year after the Battle of the Citadel.”

Shepard’s frustration reached a new peak. “How is that even possible?”

“The first person to successfully scale down advanced geth cooling technology in a firearm application was a human colonist named Earlecia Shaw. She published her design patent-free across the extranet in the final months of the war, believing that utilizing geth technology was critical to defeating them.”

“Bet she regrets that now,” Shepard said, thinking of the sheer ubiquity of thermal clips.

“On the contrary. She founded a company which still manufacturers the most efficient thermal clips, though a rival firm experimenting with synthetic diamond filaments—”

“That’s about enough history for one day.” Shepard rubbed her forehead. It seemed like all she did lately was catch up. “So you’re really telling me absolutely nobody still uses the older tech?”

“I can scan local advertisements for a dealer in antiquities, if you like.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she answered stiffly.

There was an echo of muffled laughter over her comm. Her brow furrowed. “Joker? Is that you?” The laughter morphed into an awkward cough. “Sorry, Commander. Something didn’t bother to mention it set the comm to broadcast.”

EDI was unperturbed. “My programming advises that when cultivating new organic contacts, it is helpful to include multiple listeners, to avoid misunderstandings.”

Shepard massaged the bridge of her nose. “That’s the kind of thing you want to mention upfront.”

“Noted,” EDI said. “Do you need anything further, Shepard?”

“No.” She lowered her hand from her ear, but it seemed Joker still had more to say.

“I don’t know why you’re so grumpy,” he groused. “You partied like it was the end of the world the last time we were here.”

While they were assigned to scout the Terminus after the Battle of the Citadel, Shepard was forced by logistical math to refuel at Omega before they went on to Alchera. There was no keeping the crew aboard at such a notorious port; Shepard didn’t even try. She wagered they collectively drank enough that evening to boost the station economy a full percentage point.

She could almost see it, overlaid across the futile desperation of the marketplace. A brighter hole, a bar loud with people and music. At least of half them her own crew.

Joker kept talking. “Chase and Lowe kept buying the most ludicrous drinks they could remember for Liara, insisting it was ‘human drinking culture’.”

“She played along pretty well.” Shepard smiled despite herself. “Right up until the Red Death. I could’ve told them a randomly generated kitchen-sink drink was too much for anyone.”
“It sat on that table for hours, daring someone to take a drink.”

“And everyone who tried a sip immediately ran for the head.” She laughed. “Greico was in there thirty minutes. Kaidan had to go check on him.”

“Adams and Pressly spent all night collecting cutlery and glasses in that booth, trying to build a scale model of Gagarin Station.” He paused. “You might have egged them on a little.”

“I didn’t think they’d really do it,” she protested. “All I said is I bet neither of them could recall it from memory.”

“It was good night.”

“Yeah, it was.” Shepard hesitated. “You want to come ashore? We could probably find that bar again, if we looked.”

“Nah. Doubt the warden would let me out, anyway.” Joker was very sour.

As usual, EDI’s reaction was so understated it was hard to believe she wasn’t winding him up. “It is difficult to fly the ship without a pilot in the event of an emergency, Mr. Moreau. The Normandy was not designed to be operated absent a human crew.”

“See what I mean?”

Shepard sidestepped the now-familiar argument. “Have fun debating with the ship. I’ll see you in a few.”

The pall lingering over this end of the market was getting under her skin, fear and apathy stewing in the air like a fog. Omega might as well be the end point of the galaxy, a true Terminus. Downright suffocating even for a spacer kid. She shook it off her shoulders and headed for a slightly more upscale part of town.

Necessities were easy enough. Even turians liked blue jeans, so she wasn’t hurting for clothing basics, enough to clear out her Cerberus wardrobe for good. Something Kelly said before she left the ship stuck in her mind— You should know, the crew’s been talking about your… attire.

Shepard had replied it was a civilian operation and she could wear what she liked, same as any of them. If the crew opted for Cerberus uniform, that was their call. Kelly had suggested, not without trepidation, that it didn’t instill confidence. She blew it off at the time, but Joker’s little anecdote reminded her that an important element of camaraderie was conforming just enough to seem like you belonged. Nobody could be the constant odd peg in every hole and still be part of the group. Not in the long run.

She couldn’t bring herself to ever wear Cerberus insignia. But in deference to Kelly, she picked up a few surplus utilities from a shop catering to mercs. They weren’t Alliance— they showed no allegiance at all— but they’d fit in aboard her frigate. And they sure as shit weren’t Cerberus.

There was nothing anywhere like her father’s old leather jacket. It was a shame. This Normandy had inherited the SR-1’s broken thermostat.

Last but not least, she visited a different sort of arms dealer, selected a knife with a professional pickiness that worried the clerk, and declined to have it delivered to her ship. Instead she slid it into her boot as she exited the shop. It had a satisfying weight as she walked away, enjoying the thought of finally throwing away the last of the oh-so-thoughtful Cerberus crap cluttering her cabin.
All in all, by the time she’d picked up the last of the incidentals, she’d taken a larger bite out of her stipend than she liked, and almost two hours had passed.

With her usual impeccable timing— was Miranda having her watched somehow, even now?— her comm lit up. “Shepard, I’ve found a lead on the ship upgrades you wanted. Can you meet me?”

Shepard started walking back. “Yes.”

Back in Alliance space, corporate customers contracted privately with shipbuilding firms to order their vessels, all bespoke. The military worked with their supply base. Few ships larger than a shuttle were sold retail and those came as a package— onboard life support, navigation, and so on. Not so aboard Omega. Here, each system was sold individually and installed aboard the buyer’s transport, or into one of the scrapped-out fourth-hand ships parked just outside, if the buyer was standing up a ship from scratch.

And they were selling everything, from plumbing to heavy artillery. Some of it obviously came from Alliance ships. Shepard wondered if the navy knew where their scrap ended up, and likewise how much of this salvage came from ambushes of navy patrols along the Traverse border. Lawless by design, Omega was first and foremost a haven for mercs and pirates. It made her furious.

To Shepard’s left, an elcor merchant hawked his wares with the monotonous intonations that were their hallmark. Shepard thought “him” due to the low register of his voice, though she had no idea how to differentiate elcor sex, or indeed whether they made such distinctions. They were dour-faced hulks who walked on four legs, knuckles curled beneath their stout limbs, and their gray hides were notoriously impervious to low-caliber weapons. She’d heard rumors that in their own wars, before they became spacefaring, they armed themselves by mounting cannons to their broad backs.

His two flat nostrils flared as he noticed her attention. “Hopeful: I sell the best water purification system in the Terminus. It was designed by my salarian partners.”

A cigar dangled from his vertical mouth slits, traveling up and down as he spoke. Elcor speech to Shepard’s human ears was a barely-audible rumble she felt as much as heard. Through the translator programmed into her comm, it was a tolerable drone. She knew she was missing most of the content, the parts communicated by the subtleties of scent markers, but what little facial expression the merchant possessed did look encouraged. Must have been a rough day.

She tried not to stare too longingly at the cigar. At some point that afternoon, replacing all her worldly possessions, she’d decided that if she was starting over she might as well get rid of one of her more obnoxious bad habits. So far it wasn’t going well. Since she woke, the constant stress gave her a greater-than-usual craving for a cigarette. But it was also kind of validating. For years she claimed it wasn’t the nicotine, it was the ritual, and damned if that wasn’t true after two years cold turkey.

“I don’t need a water purification unit,” she said, not unkindly, and began to move on. Miranda wasn’t known for her patience.

“Insistent: Please view my demonstration to see the difference.” He inclined his head towards a pair of fish tanks sitting on his counter.

They were small, maybe forty centimeters to a side, completely lacking in decoration, and each
bore a pair of very unhappy-looking fish. One iridescent blue and gold, scooting nervously near the surface of the tank, the other fat, brown, and yellow-spotted lurking at the bottom. It had the most mournful eyes Shepard had ever seen in a fish. Neither animal had much room to move. And in the second tank, the water was so murky that the fish were merely unhappy shadows lurking in the depths.

The elcor merchant swelled. “Proudly: As you can see, my water purification system will keep your drinking water cleaner than the leading competition even after months of maintenance neglect.”

She raised her hand to the glass. The yellow-spotted fish shied away. It lifted as it wiggled, and she caught sight of a concave belly stretched thin over its bones. Its companion didn’t appear any better fed.

The merchant continued. “We offer a two-year warranty based solely on customer satisfaction—”

Shepard straightened. “I’ll give you a thousand credits for all four fish.”

He blinked. The cigar stopped moving. “Astonished: The fish are not for sale.”

“I’m happy with my water system. What I have is an empty aquarium.” She had no idea how to keep fish, but figured her cabin’s tank had to be better than this. “Can we make a deal?”

His eyes darted around. “With disbelief: My fish are an essential sales technique for my product. They were procured at great expense from Illium and Earth—”

“Three thousand.” She rested her palms flat against the counter.

“Alarmed: You do not understand. Without my fish, clients will not see that my water is clearly healthier.”

“I don’t know a fish from a boat, and even I can tell none of these fish are healthy.” She leaned in further. “C’mon. The color of the water makes your point on its own. I’ll bet seeing them this unhappy puts customers off.”

“Suspicious: Really?”

She crossed her arms. “Put me off, that’s for sure.”

He studied her a long moment, chewing vertically at the cigar. “With reluctance: Three thousand. I will have them delivered to your ship.”

“Wonderful.” Shepard cued up her omni-tool to transfer her credits and docking information. There was a twinge of guilt as she finalized the transaction, another big chunk of that Cerberus paycheck she didn’t want to spend, gone, but it was faint. Pulling a few non-human creatures out of misery seemed like exactly the kind of thing the Illusive Man wouldn’t want her to do with it.

“Anxious: I must hire temps to replace my delivery workers. They are currently detained by a quarantine order.”

Shepard paused mid-turn, about to walk away. “Quarantine order?”

“One of the poorest neighborhoods in this part of Omega suffers from a bio-engineered illness. Aria has ordered the district quarantined.”
She filed that away for further use, gave the elcor a nod, and went in search of her X.O.

She finally caught up with Miranda near the asteroid wall at the back of the market, deep in conversation with a salarian vendor. She looked up. “There you are.”

“I got waylaid.” She nodded at the salarian. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Irdan Madrok, a purveyor of defensive technology.” Miranda gestured to Shepard. “As promised, this is my ship’s captain, Commander Shepard.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Commander,” Irdan twittered, lacing his fingers together under his chin. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Good to meet you.” She kept her nod as polite as she could. Shepard had no patience for that sort of person, who thought she was some sort of fancy collectible, but she was about to ask him for a great deal.

Miranda said, “I’ve been explaining our little problem. He has an interesting idea on how we might do business.”

“Yes.” His eyes lit up. “You see, Commander, what’s most valuable on Omega isn’t credits. It’s information.”

“So, like everywhere then.” She gestured. “What kind of information?”

“Omega started as a mining world. The eezo ran out long ago, and today we mine only more common materials, but some of the wealthiest mining companies in the Terminus still keep their offices here. And they’re always on the lookout for new leads.”

Miranda glanced at her. “But most of the safe, charted worlds already have all their survey rights parceled out. And defense of those rights in the Terminus…”

“Is somewhat less than delicate.”

“Which is where you come in.” He bounced on his toes.

“I’m sorry if Miranda gave you some other impression, but I don’t have time to deal with corporate turf wars.”

“Not at all.” His transparent inner eyelids flicked upwards. “You go places most people don’t. If you run into any promising deposits, I can turn that information around for a tidy profit. In exchange, we can trade you the tech you need.”

She folded her arms. If he was credible, this would be easier than she feared. She looked at Miranda. “Can the Normandy do that sort of thing? Identify deposits?”

“We’ll need some specialized software for our scanners, but yeah. We should be able to manage. And it shouldn’t interfere with our other priorities. Really, it’ll just use up empty compute cycles while the ship’s parked.”

Shepard turned back to Irdan. “You have a deal.”

“Excellent!” He seemed truly excited. “I’ll inform my partners immediately. We eagerly await your data.”

They shook hands, and Shepard and Miranda began winding their way out of the shipyard. As they
passed the elcor’s stand, she noticed two aides coercing the fish into bags. Unsurprisingly, the fish were not feeling cooperative.

Her comm activated. She put her finger to her ear as she stepped around a pair of pensive batarians, who offered her a scathing glare. “Shepard. Come in.”

“Commander, I’ve got something.” Jacob paused. She heard some background noise, people shouting. “There’s a whole bunch of angry people gathered here off the main road. Something about a plague that affects everyone who isn’t human, and a quarantine. They’re getting pretty pissed off.”

“Copy that. I’ve heard similar reports.”

“There’s more. Rumor has it some doctor on the inside is working on a cure. A salarian doctor.”

She glanced at Miranda. “What do you think?”

“Bioengineering plus singling out humans just might add up to the Collectors. That would catch Solus’ attention. Collectors have the best gentech in the galaxy.” Her expression was eager. “I think we get our gear from the ship, and break through that quarantine.”

Shepard actually smiled. “My thoughts exactly.”

They regrouped near the apartments and ate lunch while they waited for one of the Cerberus grunts back on the Normandy to run their gear out to them. While her crew exchanged small talk, Shepard scooped up her noodles and listened to the news report playing idly from a speaker overhead. Most of it was a total mystery. Politics was never her strong suit to start with, and after so long disengaged from current events, she doubted she’d ever catch up.

She tried to be happy about it instead of disconcerted. She hated the politics. It was the worst part of being a spectre. Worst part of headlining a war, too.

Then the reporter switched topics. “The Shepard Memorial on Akuze opened recently, presided by Admiral Steven Hackett.”

Shepard licked her lips and set down her cup, her last bite a hard lump in her throat that took a few swallows to get down. The snippet carried on without any consideration. “Tune in to keyword FCC News for an exclusive interview with famed architect Aleksander Lidstrom on how he captured the essence of Shepard’s mission in a new addition to the longstanding memorial honoring the pioneering colonists lost in 2177.”

She closed her eyes, seeing airy wooden arches intermixed with a bird’s nest of iron fretwork as they walked into the hotel on Abael. “Do you like the architecture?” Kaidan asked. “I incurred a favor.”

Kaidan asked, or his friends bid the project as a gift to him. He’d been involved in some slight way. Had to be. There was no part of his life she failed to contaminate, even friendships that had never involved her. For a moment she almost wished the guilt would crush her and make an end of it. And then she wished she could go to the comm room on her ship and figure out a way to call him that wouldn’t paint a stylized orange target on his back.

Jacob caught her staring into space. “All done, Commander?”

“Yes.” She pushed away from the counter. “Let’s go catch a plague.”
They suited up and walked back along what passed for the main concourse. Omega architecture was an insane mismatch of a dozen centuries of different aesthetics, materials, and repair work. Streets here would be alleys anywhere else. They turned a corner and came face to face with a gathered crowd of mainly batarians, with a few humans and vorcha, and a lone pair of asari whispering to each other near the back.

They were all looking up at a shabbily dressed batarian standing head and shoulders above the onlookers on an upturned crate, flanked by two more batarians, both heavily armed.

“Repent!” he thundered out, apropos of nothing. “The end is nigh!”

There were a few jeers from the crowd, but more rapt attention than she would have expected or cared to see.

Thus encouraged, he shouted out another proverb. His hand made a gesture like slapping a hard surface. Several batarians in his audience cheered. Shepard frowned.

Kasumi made a face. “Humans are an affliction upon the galaxy?”

“Blight,” Shepard said, absently. “Or curse, if you’re religious, which I bet he is.”

“Pardon?”

“Blight is a better translation than affliction.” She looked up and took in their stares, and nodded towards the preacher. “Our friend here speaks Dherak. That gesticulation was a negative emphatic.” Then, at their increased confusion, she repeated the motion. “Most batarian languages are visual. They use gestures as adjective-like modifiers.”

Miranda looked at her sidelong with something like appreciation. “Your dossier said you were fluent, but gesticulations are a tricky part of speech to master, for humans.”

She shrugged, a touch embarrassed, and uncomfortable with the reminder of how well they knew her. She still didn’t know them at all. “Dherak is the official state language of the Hegemony. The Alliance thought if they were going to send spec ops into batarian systems it might be good if a few of us knew the lingo. And I got a lot of practice in the Verge.”

Kasumi cocked her head. “Isn’t that why we have electronic translators?”

“Translators can be detected or jammed. Plus most can’t cope with gesticulations unless they’re tied to ocular implants.” Shepard glanced around at her crew, who were staring at her askance. “What?”

Jacob’s eyebrows were in his hair. “Most spec ops folks I’ve met treated the language training like a joke.”

“My sole academic talent,” she sighed. Then she deliberately turned away from the batarian’s ranting, and back to the subject at hand. “Let’s move. Standing here with this much firepower is a little provocative, and we don’t need that kind of distraction.”

The mob Jacob reported had largely dispersed by the time they reached the quarantine boundary, a solitary hatch leading to a residential slum. Its metal facing was scarred, but it fit tight, and its electronic warnings flashed bright and brilliant. Shepard knew station hazards. The area might be impoverished, but someone took care of that hatch. Someone who cared about the integrity of the station, if not any of its particular residents.
The turian guarding the door was in street clothes and holding a shotgun. Not even a merc, really. Just some hired muscle. As they walked up, an irate human woman, mid-twenties at best, was throwing a tantrum fit for the big screen. “You can’t keep me out! I live here!”

She actually stomped her foot. Shepard guessed she was the last and most stubborn of the residents. “What’s the problem?”

The guard grated a mandible against his face. “The lady here doesn’t know when I’m doing her a favor. The guards inside’ll cut down anyone who comes through.”

“You can’t do this!” The girl’s voice went up the scale. “Everything I own is in that apartment! Looters are going to clean it out—”

“I said get lost,” the turian snapped. “It’s a plague zone. Quarantine orders.”

“I’m human, you ass. Humans can’t get the plague!”

Miranda cocked her head. “Is that true?”

The guard was out of patience. “Every other species is vulnerable. We’re not taking chances. Nobody gets in or out until this thing’s run its course.”

Shepard sat back on her heel, and took a shot at who might have the concern, money, and influence to maintain a hatch and hire guards. “Good to see Aria takes spectacular care of her people.”

He shrugged. He had a strange accent, like nothing she’d heard in Council space, maybe something native to Omega. “It’s the slums. Plagues are bad for business. This is the easiest way to keep it from spreading. She did hire us to keep order, and it’s not exactly a treat for the guys inside.”

She wasn’t interested in his excuses. “I need access.”

“You look like the sort that goes picking fights. Kind of like that salarian doc they’ve got inside. Crazy bastard set his clinic smack in the middle of Blue Suns territory a few months back, and refused to evacuate when this plague hit.” He was matter-of-fact. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve got orders to keep this hatch sealed until either the sickness or the mercs kill everyone. Then we go mop up.”

“You’ve got mercs in there, too?”

“Who do you think runs this district? Though with the Suns dropping like flies, I figure Blood Pack’s moving in. Vorcha are immune to everything.” The guard tapped his gun. “You’re still not going in. Human survivors are looting apartments left and right.”

Shepard straightened, shifting her feet, and abruptly in the place of a mildly interested bystander there was a seasoned fighter—and a dangerous one at that. “I’m not a looter. I’m going through that hatch. And anyone who gets in my way is guaranteed a bad time.”

Her expression made it clear that declaration included him. He weighed his options. It didn’t take long. “I’ll radio ahead. My boys’ll let you by. The Blue Suns are another matter.”

She rewarded his alacrity with a small, sharp smile. “Thanks.”

The resident stepped forward and shoved the guard. “You’re letting them through but not me? You son of a bitch.”
“You don’t have a grenade launcher, lady.” He jerked his chin. “Get lost.”

She stormed off, shaking her head and promising retaliation. Empty threats, as far as Shepard could tell. She did indeed carry a grenade launcher—a new, sleekly folded model that fit over her shield generator. Jacob overlooked few details in equipping the Normandy’s armory.

“Word of warning, professional courtesy,” the guard said as he unlocked the hatch. “I can’t let anyone out until the plague’s run its course or Aria will eat my liver. Slowly. I hope you brought supplies.”

“Understood.” Shepard gave him a nod, and they entered the slums.

The hatch rolled shut behind them. The bolts slammed home, and left the group of four humans standing alone on an abandoned street.
Inside the district, the first thing Shepard noticed was the complete silence. It was midday. There should have been residents scurrying along the the darkened streets between jobs, running errands, grabbing a bite to eat. Poverty was everywhere, from the rusting sheet metal that encased the neighborhood’s bulkheads to the sad empty planters decorating the intersections with their dust-dry dirt, but even in the poorest places Shepard had ever visited, people didn’t shut themselves away. Not as a matter of course. Not unless something was really wrong— more wrong than rampant illness.

“This is very odd,” Miranda said. “Disease shouldn’t be able infect across species. It has to be engineered.”

Shepard drew her rifle and checked the action, unconsciously settling into that relaxed-alert ready state she assumed whenever she entered an unknown but likely hostile situation. Every sense was keyed up, prepared to translate perception into action, but her movements were easy, even calm. For the first time in days the fog lifted from her brain and she found she could think clearly. This was a mission, and she’d run hundreds of those. “We won’t be the only ones to have that thought. Stay sharp. The residents are bound to be suspicious right now.”

“Where is everyone?” Jacob asked, likewise arming himself. “You’d think they’d be trying to escape.”

Kasumi stroked her chin. “Solus was working on a cure. Maybe they headed towards his clinic.”

“All of them?” Miranda raised an eyebrow as they headed deeper into the slum. “There’s too many residences for that—”

“Quiet,” Shepard said aloud, as her hand raised automatically in a silent order to halt.

She expected one of them to ask what she’d heard, a knee-jerk response contrary to her command, but to their credit they each closed their mouths and went on alert. Miranda wrapped her free hand around her toy of a gun but kept it aimed at the floor. Kasumi drew closer to the wall, slipping further out of sight. Jacob raised his rifle.

It wasn’t much of a sound. Footsteps, maybe. A clatter of equipment. Then the buzzing, a mechanical-vibrational hissing noise Shepard recognized from long afternoons working with her father as a welding torch.

She edged around the corner. A pair of turians in blue hardsuits were fiddling with a hatch, their backs to her. One held a rifle. A lookout. The other squinted through the intense heat, torch in one hand and the filler rod in the other, gas tanks strapped to his back, as he methodically sealed an apartment door.

Her squad moved up at her gesture. Shepard sighted on the armed merc, and opened fire.

The turian knew what he was doing. With barely a pause for surprise as the bullets hit his shield, he spun sideways, behind a support column and out of her line of fire. The other was slower to react with his hands full. He dove into the hatch alcove— scant cover in the best of circumstances.

Miranda and Jacob occupied the welder, her crouched by his knees while he fired over her head,
both aware their biotics would be ineffective against a shielded target. They hammered away at his defenses. He managed to draw his pistol and return fire.

Shepard continued exchanging shots with her target. Neither of them could get a good sight on the other, not even enough to take down their shields, once he got into cover. She thought she had him, but he slipped back out of sight. Shepard let out of a curse of frustration.

Then, down the street, Kasumi appeared out of thin air not two feet from Shepard’s target. She smirked, raised her pistol, and put two rounds into his face at point blank range. He crumpled to the floor. “Bet he wasn’t expecting that!”

She’d seen cloaking technology like that before, on geth scouts. While it was common knowledge that the Alliance took fallen geth for research, she hadn’t realized so many fruits of those efforts had penetrated the private market. Whatever the mysteries of her profession Kasumi Goto was about as far from military as a person could get. Another unwelcome reminder that she’d been out of the world a long time.

Jacob managed to catch the second merc in the knee. He stumbled out of the doorway. Shepard polished him off, clean as a training exercise. He fell and did not rise.

The squad relaxed. Miranda approached the corpses and nudged the nearest with her foot. “They know we’re here now.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Jacob said. “This is a rough neighborhood. And there’s a plague. My guess is these guys have taken their share of fire since the district got locked down.”

“Agreed.” Shepard bent to shut off the dead man’s gas valve, and then turned to examine the hatch. It appeared to lead to an apartment. They’d only just started the weld; she bet it could still be forced open.

Kasumi ran her fingertip down the weld line, hovering just over it. “Brutal way to enforce quarantine.”

She shook her head. “I don’t like it. Someone help me get this open.”

Jacob holstered his gun and worked his fingers into the crack, opposite Shepard. She nodded to him. “On three.”

She counted down, and they heaved. At first nothing happened. Then, millimeter by millimeter, it began to squeak open. Shepard increased her force. The fresh weld began to give way like taffy—and abruptly failed, sending her and Jacob stumbling backwards. Kasumi caught her. Jacob landed on his ass, hard enough to wince. Miranda hauled him up.

Beyond the hatch was a one-room apartment barely three meters to a side. It held a desk with a cheap terminal, a wall-mounted safe—a necessity in this sort of neighborhood—and a bed with an aging batarian curled on his side, his back to them. He was quite still, enough to reveal he was already dead. A foul stench rose from the body. Shepard stepped inside.

“Shepard, do we have time for this?” Miranda crossed her arms. She stayed well back from the batarian corpse.

“I need to know what’s going on here.” She bent over the desk and woke the terminal. The keyboard and screen text were both in a batarian script. Shepard pursed her lips and typed a few searches. “There’s a few journal entries here, from the past two weeks, since the first victims fell ill.”
Kasumi likewise remained on the far side of the threshold. “What can a diary tell us we don’t already know?”

Shepard kept her attention on the screen. “I’ve got something.”

“What?” Miranda strayed closer, interest overcoming revulsion.

“The Suns have been sealing off apartments since the initial outbreaks. They issued a general order for residents to stay in their homes, and shot those who disobeyed.” She tapped on the keyboard. “Also, the guard outside was right about humans looting the victims.”

“Some don’t wait until we’re dead,” a new voice said, thick with mucus.

Shepard straightened. The batarian slumped over the bedcovers, propped on his elbow with a pistol extended in his other hand. His arm shook with the strain, his breath a wet cough. Sores dotted his head and dried yellow fluid caked each of his four eyes. The hacking turned to pained laughter as he caught sight of their shocked faces, spilling through his cracked lips. “Couldn’t wait for your plague to finish me off?”

Her brow furrowed. “It’s not my plague.”

His expression turned bitter, but his reply was lost in another series of wrenching coughs. She knelt down beside him and laid her weapon on the ground, and opened a suit pouch, switching to Dherak automatically. It wasn’t totally unlike being back in the Verge. “Here, break this under your nose. It’ll help you breathe.”

The tablet was intended for toxic gas exposure, but should buy him some measure of comfort. The batarian eyed it with deep suspicion. However, he was either close enough to death or desperate enough for life to put it aside. He rested the pistol against his body, cracked the capsule, inhaled deeply. His face relaxed as the phlegm cleared. “I don’t understand.”

She gestured back at the neighborhood. “What happened here?”

He lay back. The pistol slumped against his stomach. Sweat beaded his crest. His hands twitched as he spoke, trying to form the motions that matched his words, but he was very weak. “Some human-engineered plague is killing off the rest of this ward. Half of us are dead already.”

“Humans didn’t create this plague.” She realized as she said it that she couldn’t possible know that was true. It was a kneejerk, defensive response to over a decade of fighting batarians throughout the Traverse.

The man snorted. “You’re the only ones not dying. That’s enough for me.”

Shepard thought it was interesting that the batarian seemed more angry at humans surviving unscathed than at the deaths, judging from his gesticulation, feeble as it was.

Miranda remained several prim steps back from the batarian. “The vorcha aren’t dying either. In fact, they seem to be benefitting from this plague, ousting the Blue Suns.”

“They’re immune to everything. And when have you ever heard of a vorcha scientist?” He shook his head. Pus dripped down and wet his shirt.

Kasumi held her hand politely over her nose. “We should find the salarian and leave. This situation is about to go critical. We don’t want to be here when that happens.”
Shepard glanced back at him. “Do you know where we can find Mordin Solus’ clinic?”

“Mordin?” He coughed again, clutching his chest and straining for air. “Human sympathizer, taking in refugees. I hope the Blue Suns burn his clinic to ground. I hope— I hope—”

Again that emphasis on humans. Another coughing fit consumed him and his bile. Shepard waited for it to pass. “A guard said Mordin was working on a cure.”

“He’s no doctor. I know that.” The batarian wiped his mouth.

She cocked her head. “I guess he could be more of a PhD.”

“The Blue Suns tried to press him for protection money. Standard practice. He killed them all and displayed the corpses as a warning. Then he got back to work.” His respect was tinged with fear. “That’s not a doctor. There’s a rumor he was in intelligence back in the Salarian Union.”

“STG,” Jacob muttered.

“This is all speculation,” Miranda said. “We need to find the doctor quickly. He’s a salarian, vulnerable to the plague. Among other things.”

Medicine would be in short supply with a plague underway. His clinic was a natural target regardless of his combat prowess.

Jacob folded his arms. “This sector’s never been mapped. I checked while you all were shopping.”

The batarian made another attempt to speak. “He’s further in. Hubward. There’s signs as you get closer.”

“Dead mercs hung up like tinsel?” Shepard couldn’t stop herself for anything.

All four eyes narrowed. Miranda frowned. “We should be going.”

Shepard stood and offered the batarian her hand. “When I find the clinic, I’ll tell them to send someone back for you. In the meantime you should get somewhere safe. We caught the Suns halfway through welding your hatch shut.”

He stared at her hand for a long moment, his eyes flicking to hers once before he accepted and allowed her to haul him to his feet. He braced himself against the wall. “Maybe you humans aren’t all alike. Strange thought.” A weak cough escaped him. “I’ll rest here, just a few minutes.”

Shepard nodded, and they left the apartment.

“So,” Miranda said, conversationally, as they headed deeper into the district. “How many languages do you speak?”

Shepard shrugged. “Lots. Fluent in about several, can get by in a bunch more. Like I said—”

“Sole academic talent.”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her neck, embarrassed. “I grew up with English and Spanish, which is maybe how I got a knack for it. I did well in the familiarization course all N-division take and got recommended to ALI. Kind of a joke that turned into a game with my instructors, seeing what they could come up with that the jarhead couldn’t learn.”
“Why?” Jacob was frankly confused. “I can’t imagine this had a lot of pragmatic value. Not frequently.”

The way he put it made it seem silly to answer that she’d actually enjoyed it. “You never know. Any list of Alliance frequent fliers to the Hegemony has got to include my name and it’s partly because of this.”

Jacob snorted. “Pretty short list. Not many humans there even before the formal disputes.”

“Alliance,” she corrected, absently, as she scanned the street ahead. “Plenty of humans in the Hegemony. Just not Alliance.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Slaves,” Miranda clarified. “Coming up on the third generation now.”

That effectively killed the conversation. They rounded the corner and entered a plaza. Rusty and listless as the rest of this unremarkable neighborhood, all that set it apart was a haze of smoke, not quite enough to tickle her throat. Shepard’s eyes trailed the tendrils curling up to the ceiling. “Ventilation’s starting to choke.”

Kasumi likewise tracked it. “Couldn’t have been for long. There’s too much air left.”

The smoke came from fires in the several large planters. Their dirt lay in a heap on the road, mixed with stick-brown dead plants. Darker, shadowed objects lurked in the depths of the dying flames. Shepard approached and spied a three-fingered hand hanging over the concrete lip. The spidery look of it was partly due to the informal cremation but she guessed it was turian. “They’re burning the dead.”

Miranda shrugged, indifferent. “Makes sense. This sector’s locked down. They don’t get out until they’ve killed the plague or it’s killed all of them.”

Shepard had seen far more gruesome sights in her life than burnt corpses but the discovery left her unsettled all the same. It wasn’t like this had never happened before. Closed habitats were always at risk to outbreaks of disease. One of those ghost stories—a new strain of flu broke out on a remote station, station went dark, and weeks later investigation turned up a whole orbital colony of dead. Only some of them were actually true. And quarantine was the only way to be sure it wouldn’t spread.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel that on a station this large, some kinder method should have been employed. Omega had the resources to help these people properly. It wasn’t that the extreme measures were senseless; it was that they should be wholly unnecessary. Someone felt letting these people die was more economical than treating them.

Shepard’s eyes traveled between the planter-turned-crematorium and the ventilation grate slotted into the roof above. Somebody ought to make this problem too expensive for Aria or her cronies to ignore.

“I’ve got an idea.” She leaned her rifle against the planter and hauled herself up onto the lip, balanced precariously on the soles of her hardsuit boots. Stretching upwards, with a grunt of effort, she managed to dislodge the grate. Being tall had its occasional benefits, if rarely any charm.

Kasumi put her hands on her hips. “Don’t tell me we’re crawling through the vents. There’s old school, and then there’s just plain silly.”
“Nope.” She managed to hook her arms into the opening and pull herself into the shaft. It didn’t take long to find what she hoped would be there. A maintenance grid. Life support systems were complicated and HVAC was no exception. There would be repair stations throughout the sector. Other than the turian script, this one wasn’t much different from those she grew up with.

The sensor was caked in grime. Shepard leaned in and blew on it hard to clear it.

Immediately, rusty gaskets opened in floor. A breeze stirred their feet. Kasumi took a cautious step back. “Shepard—”

The emergency hatches at the three entry points to the plaza slammed shut. Miranda thrust her omni-tool into the flow of gas coming from the newly-opened vents. Her eyes flew wide. “Breather helmets!”

Shepard squinted at the console, and rubbed at a spec of dirt. The turian symbol for carbon emerged beside that for oxygen. “Shit!”

Frantically, she fanned air into the sensor, but it made no difference. The station poured fresh oxygen into the room. It hit the fires like gasoline and spiked the air with CO2 and billowing smoke in a runaway cycle. Her squad scurried to get their masks in place. Trapped in the duct, Shepard didn’t have the room to manipulate her own helmet. She threw herself further into the shaft, past the sensors and towards the control panel. “Shit shit shit—”

The fires finally tripped the smoke alarm and set off a shrill warning to evacuate. The flow of oxygen ceased, replaced by more CO2, intended to choke the fire without regard for anyone trapped in the area, lest it consume the station outright.

The light died as the fire suppression did its job and extinguished the burning dead in the planter below. Shepard summoned her omni-tool and tried to read the labels by the dull orange glow, wiping at an even thicker layer of grime. Temperature, mass flow, humidity-

She realized she was holding her breath. Fire control, fire control— there!

Shepard spun the dial until the needle sank to zero. The whirring of fans ceased. She risked a lungful of air and found it thin, but breathable. She let it out slowly. This system had been neglected for years, to overreact like that. It made her blood boil. “Ok. Find oxygen sensor now, kill sloppy maintenance techs later.”

Miranda called up, her voice muffled by the breather mask. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Making sure we have a way out of this district once we find the doc.” And anyone else who wanted to leave, as well. She returned to the first panel and resumed her search for the O2 sensor, more carefully this time. “Anyone got a bit of wire?”

“Wire?” Jacob repeated. “Why would you need wire?”

“Here.” Kasumi produced a piece from somewhere in her suit and passed it to him. He boosted himself onto the planter and handed it up to Shepard.

“Thanks.” She wriggled, maneuvering into position and threaded the thin metal strand up through the sampler, until there was no more give in the line. “This vent system has to hook into a neighboring HVAC somewhere. If I reduce the flow through the sensor, it’ll decide the oxygen level has plummeted, and since pressure is fine it may trigger an emergency opening sequence.”

If nothing else, that runaway reaction would have spent a lot of the oxygen stored locally just now.
Miranda nodded, as if slotting a piece into place. “You don’t want your emergency systems to rely on the judgment of an oxygen-deprived engineer.”

“Exactly.” Shepard slid back out of the vent and landed heavily on the floor. She dusted off the front of her suit. “At the very least, Aria or whoever’s watching this sector will get the reading and have to decide to sacrifice the sector or open the doors. Could make it easier for us to get out once we find Solus.”

They pried through a weaker hatch and set off down the hall. The squad walked across a thoroughfare, past a bank of ATMs and vending machines blinking cheerfully at the empty streets. The absence of people was uncanny. She was almost grateful when they ran into a few weakened units of turian Blue Suns, despite the minor skirmishes that resulted. But her squad made their way through the district relatively unimpeded—so easily, in fact, that Shepard let her guard down.

She rounded a corner and collided with a krogan.

He looked as surprised as her. She had just enough time to register his uniform before he let out a battle cry and lunged forward.

She dropped to the ground. The krogan stumbled over her and fell hard. One of her squad fired into him while he lay prone. She felt the body shudder at the impact. Other shots rang out nearby.

Shepard pushed his legs off her with a grunt. Miranda had her submachine gun trained forward. She never stopped firing as she spoke. “Ambush. Suns and whatever these are.”

“Blood Pack, I think.” Her knowledge of Terminus merc groups wasn’t excellent even when it was current, but krogan didn’t work well with anyone. The Blood Pack were one of the few groups to successfully organize them, probably because they were run by and for krogan. She collected her rifle and scuttled towards the fight, keeping low.

Jacob lay down cover fire, allowing Kasumi to sneak ahead and gouge their enemies point-blank before disappearing behind her electronic cloak once more. A squad of Blue Suns crouched in cover, fighting off what looked like an endless supply of vorcha fodder, goaded on by krogan officers. Their bodies piled the floor. A few Suns were down as well, dragged back by their colleagues. More Blood Pack poured in from the hatches at the back of the room.

Shepard spied a staircase rising along the starboard side. “Hold position!”

“Yes ma’am!” Jacob’s pull brought two vorcha into easy range. Her skull vibrated in response, but she was far enough away to avoid debilitation.

Wasting no time, she raced to the stairs and found a small balcony overlooking the fight. Shepard crowded the banister, set her assault rifle on the floor, and unpacked the sniper rifle from the kit on her back. It unfolded smoothly and beeped its readiness. She aimed over the heads of the main fray and fired.

A vorcha fell out of cover at the back of the room. Its container of kerosene rolled away. They were using flamethrowers, then. Wonderful.

She took aim a second time and finished off a krogan preparing to charge the line, and then a third, through the head of a second vorcha. The gun beeped at her again, so she ejected the heat sink and inserted another.

Though Shepard favored her assault rifle, a perfect blend of power, precision, and adrenaline, there was something contemplative about the sniper rifle she had always enjoyed. The rhythm was
calming, the work more intellectual than instinctive. Another pair of vorcha dropped. The Blood Pack grew more cautious, sending fresh soldiers more slowly into the fray, clinging to cover.

She managed to kill another krogan—three shots all on his own, between shields and the blood rage—before Miranda called out over her radio. “Shepard! They’re on the stairs!”

Naturally, it couldn’t last. But the chaos of closer combat had its own pleasures.

The first vorcha to step onto the balcony lost its head. The second ducked, and as a result, her next shots hit the third while he was still climbing the stairs. He fell back onto his companions. Screeches rose from the stairwell. She shot the one crouched on the ground.

Below, all of the remaining Blue Suns were down. Kasumi had pulled back, panting, and tried to keep them off the stairs with her shotgun. Jacob and Miranda divided the battlefield with their biotics. But by sheer numbers alone, it was inevitable that a lucky few slipped past the defenses.

Jacob let out an incoherent sound of surprise and pain. A jet of flame gushed up the balcony. Shepard stared, exhilarated, the heat washing over her in one great wave.

The remaining vorcha on the stair scrabbled to get up. One pushed ahead just as the flames reached maximum height. It—and its kerosene tank—were engulfed.

“Get back!” Shepard yelled, throwing herself behind a support column. Flimsy, but the only immediate shelter.

The explosion hit just as her hands covered her head. The column took the brunt, but the residual force was enough to buckle it and send her sprawling. Her shield popped, but she was still airborne, the pressure blowing her back. She braced for impact-and collided gently with the far wall, like falling into a pillow.

Her ears rang. Her shield was recharging, but there was a definite lack of bullets pinging off her armor in its absence. The dead vorcha sprawled across the floor, charred and smoking. Her hair was full of dust. She brushed at it, pieces of concrete falling between her fingers. A large circle of bulkhead spalled away where she struck it but she wasn’t so much as bruised.

Her body felt hot all over. Not like a brush with the fiery explosion, but like a fever. Like she was cooking from the inside out.

Shepard contemplated that for a disturbing moment before brushing it aside. This was new tech. Her shield must have come online right before she hit, and overheated her suit from taking two major hits in rapid succession. Nothing else made any sense. It was already cooling.

She had to stifle a laugh. Not hysterical, but giddy at the realization that she was almost having fun. After two years on a slab adrenaline and excitement were both a bit overwhelming.

The expensive photonic cells coating her suit had blistered down one arm in the heat. Shepard brushed away the flakes as she stood and took in the damage. The balcony was twisted, and the stairwell simply gone. She walked to the edge and looked down.

The smoking ruin of a floor below concealed her team. However, the fight seemed to have quieted. “Everyone in one piece down there?”

Miranda stepped into the smoke and waved a small spot clear. She looked up at Shepard with no small amount of disapproval.
Shepard held up her hands. “This one wasn’t my fault.”

“We’re fine. Can you get down?”

It was a little over three meters. She stowed her guns, jumped, and rolled to kill her momentum. This body felt heavier, like there was lead in her bones.

“The blast sent the remaining krogan running,” Miranda said, glancing towards the back. “They might be a problem later.”

“Later’s better than now.” Behind them, Kasumi knelt beside Jacob, helping him spread medi-gel over a burn on his face.

He caught Shepard’s look. “Got too close to one of the pyros. It’ll heal.”

“Great. Finish up, and let’s move out.” Shepard rolled her shoulder and glanced ahead. “Can’t be far now.”

Her good humor continued. Routine fights had become somewhat meditative for her over the years; she was a highly physical person whose mental processing tended to improve when her body was occupied by heavy work. And all things considered, beating up a squad of mercs was the most normal thing she’d done since waking up.

Looking after her team inspired a similar familiarity. Right now, it didn’t matter that two of them were Cerberus. That kind of problem existed outside the mission.

They got Jacob patched up and continued hubward, by the directional reckoning of mined-out asteroids. The corridor dead-ended in a locked hatch. Shepard attempted to tag it open, then banged on it with the butt of her rifle.

“What’s the problem?” Jacob asked. His cheek was shiny with half-set medi-gel. Every so often, she caught him picking at the edges.

“This whole ward’s cheap as hell,” she said, giving it another whack. “Sometimes you can jar the magnetic clamps.”

Kasumi put a fingertip to her lips. “Or we could hack the lock.”

Shepard frowned. “I don’t see a control unit.”

“They eliminated them once the omni-gel trick became widely known.” She stepped up to the door, bemused. “You’re telling me the great Commander Shepard can’t break through a simple digital lock?”

She crossed her arms. “I’ve learned how to do a lot. There’s only so much time. Some things got left out.”

Miranda glanced at her sidelong. “You look at a computer like it’s plotting your death.”

Shepard scowled. Kasumi’s grin widened as she fussed with the hatch. “Ask me when we’re back on the ship. I can show you the basics.”

Long ago—too long—Tali had promised the same, and somehow, Shepard had never gotten around to it. Back then it felt like she had forever to learn.

The hatch popped open. It was immediately clear they’d taken a wrong turn. Instead of a clinic,
more station passageways, they saw another apartment. Shepard was less concerned with the unintentional break-in than the two men scrambling for their guns at the far end of the living room.

She marched in with her rifle raised. Their furtive, defensive motions hardly marked them as residents. The picture on the wall of an elderly turian couple confirmed it. Shepard sighted on the nearest. “What have we here?”

His lip curled. “Get lost. We found this place first.”

“Looters,” Jacob said, joining her. He nodded at a cabinet, door ajar, lock broken.

“Ah, c’mon,” the other man said. “It’s not like they’re using it.”

It irked Shepard that the sick batarian was right—at least some of the human residents were only making this worse. “Stealing from the dead is about as low as it gets. You’re going stop that.”

The thieves took note of her weaponry for the first time. Then their eyes strayed to her armor, and finally her face. The closest man sneered. “Or what, you’ll shoot us?”

“I’ve killed people for less,” she answered mildly. Kasumi snickered.

He blanched, and exchanged a look with his colleague. “Ok, ok. Sheesh. We’re done, alright? Look, I’m putting the stuff back.”

The second man had a brighter estimation of their odds. “You’re going to let her push you around?”

“Do the math. Four on two.” He frowned. “Besides, she looks kind of familiar.”

“Crazy is what she looks,” he muttered, but held his peace. “What’re you doing, if you didn’t come here for the goods?”

“Lost.” Shepard lowered her weapon. “We thought this was the way to the clinic.”

“Solus’ place? Yeah, head back the way you came and go straight across the hall. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” She turned to go, her squad trailing her, and was halfway out the door when he piped up again.

“Wait—I do know you. You’re that spectre chick. Shepard.” He chewed his lip. “News vids said you kicked it.”

“A long story,” she said shortly, and let the hatch close behind her. Her heart was pounding. She took a deep breath. Being recognized was going to happen. But every time it did, she felt her grip on this whole afterlife business slip a little further. It was getting out of her control and she didn’t want to lose it entirely before she made her own peace.

Kasumi spoke up, her eyes lifted ahead. “I think we found the clinic signs the batarian was talking about. Over there.”

A red cross, by some quirk or intent identical to the long-recognized human symbol for first aid, was painted haphazardly on a concrete bulkhead leading into a narrow alley. A single light buzzed erratically over it. The words “medical clinic” were written underneath in several languages, English, Dherak, and a common turian colonial language. Shepard wagered that was a representative slice of the district’s population, given that vorcha had no written language. The
words were spray-painted but crisp, as if applied with a stencil. Methodical.

They turned down the alley and walked for some time in the semi-dark, the tall, close walls pressing down on them. It made her neck itch. There was no cover, no escape from a potential ambush. The flamethrowers especially would be effective in this kind of enclosed space.

Eventually one wall gave way to a low-ceilinged side room behind a panel of cracked glass. A young man stood in a lab coat surrounded by armed mechs. He took in their gear with a jaded eye. “This is a sanctuary. Cause any trouble and the mechs will turn you into hamburger.”

Shepard glanced at them, and tilted her head up, where she saw the aforementioned Blue Suns pinned above the window like a string of paper dolls. They’d found the clinic. “Understood.”

A hardened hatch, the type Shepard expected in a ship’s airlock, disgorged them into a deafening lobby. Dozens of plague refugees crowded reception desk. Every seat was filled, standing room only aside from narrow paths allowed passage of medical personnel. Though several people were lying or leaning as best they could, with the same Sores and heavy cough they saw before, most seemed in perfect health. Apparently the clinic provided shelter from more than a virus.

Shepard pushed her way to the desk and shouted over the din. “Mordin Solus?”

A harassed clerk gave her an exhausted look, matched in its intensity by the angry glares of the several people she’d elbowed out of line. The woman jerked her thumb aft. “He’s back that way, but he’s not meeting with patients.”

“We’re not patients. We’re here to help.” Shepard gave her a nod. “Thank you.”

She returned the nod, sucked in a breath, and turned to the next person waiting.

Past the lobby the noise changed to groans, coughs, and the low chatter of doctors, nurses, and their assistants consulting on treatment. The first room contained cots and mattresses, some of them looking dragged from local homes, piled on the floor with barely room to walk between them. None of the personnel were salarian.

Shepard glanced across the hall. That room had fewer people, and more microscopes, glove boxes, autoclaves, refrigerators, and the other paraphernalia of a biomedical research lab. Two people bent over an ongoing autopsy, debating the results, one human, one salarian. She made her way over, trailed by her team.

The salarian was tall and spare even by the standards of his species. One of his pair of fleshy horns was amputated close to the scalp, leaving barely a bump, and multiple scars crossed his amphibious skin, pinkish red against the beige. Large black pupils dominated his eyes, but the thin strip of brown iris had that same light as in his holo.

As she approached, he was dictating a rapid-fire stream of observations to his assistant. “Use malanarin. Plenty on hand. Almost as good. Causes cramping in batarians. Supplement with butemerol.”

The assistant nodded and scrawled hastily on a datapad. “Malanarin and butemerol. Got it, Professor.”

Shepard crossed her arms. “I thought humans couldn’t get the plague.”

The assistant started and almost dropped his datapad. The doctor, however, turned towards her deliberately, curiosity his only expression. He was considerably older than she expected. “They do not. Need to avoid poisoning human residents with aerosolized treatment.”

“Mordin Solus, I presume?”

He raised his omni-tool and took a quick scan of her before she could lodge a protest. “Hm… Don’t recognize you from area. Too well-armed to be refugees. No mercenary uniform. Quarantine still in effect. Here for something else.”

Shepard started to speak. Solus turned away, pacing in thought. “Vorcha? Crew to clean them out? Unlikely. Vorcha a symptom, not a cause.”

She tried again. “We—”

“The plague?” He rested his chin in his hand. “Alliance insignia, N7. Investigating possible use as bio-weapon?”

“If—”

“Too many guns, not enough data equipment.” Solus frowned, but his mouth never stopped moving. “Soldiers, not scientists—”

Shepard raised her voice. “Don’t you ever take a breath?”

His inner lids flicked up over his eyes. She steadied her temper. “I came here to find you, ok? I’m Nathaly Shepard, I’m on a critical mission, and I need your help.”

“Shepard.” Another blink. “Spectre. Human.” He sucked in a breath, eyes narrowing. “Supposed to be dead. Alliance not supposed to be in Terminus.”

She winced. It was almost painful for her to say it, but she gritted her teeth. “I’m not here with the Alliance.”

“No? Not Council. Same problems. Who?”

“I—” She glanced at Miranda and Jacob, in their white-and-black uniforms, then back at the doctor. She swallowed the taste of bile and steeled herself. “Have you heard of an organization called Cerberus?”

It was the closest she could come to stating she was here with them. With them wasn’t the same as for them. Not that many would see the distinction.

His confusion grew, but the deepening puzzle seemed to delight rather than frustrate him. “Crossed paths from time to time. Thought they only worked with humans. What mission?”

This was firmer ground. “The Collectors are abducting human colonists. They’re using strange technology, things we’ve never seen before. They might be the source of your plague.”

“Had similar thoughts. Plague engineered. Collectors one of few groups with necessary expertise.” He shook his head and went back to his work, typing observations into a terminal. “No. Too busy. Clinic understaffed. Best assistant gone. Plague spreading too fast. Too many patients.”
Jacob watched the exchange, brooding, while Kasumi circled the perimeter, running her fingertip over the more interesting objects. Miranda stepped forward. “Your assistant is missing?”


Shepard folded her arms. “Too much work to do.”


“I didn’t like how people were getting trapped here.”

“ Forced Blue Suns and Aria’s thugs to seal doors manually and guard exits, away from residents. Positive outcome. However, is likely vorcha used opportunity to further penetrate facility.” His inner eyelids flicked up. “Why are you here?”

Jacob cleared his throat. “We need a scientist. And we need data on the Collectors. This plague seemed like a good place to start.”

“Merchs are welding people into their own homes.” Shepard surprised herself. She intended to give Jacob’s answer. “I can’t cure a plague but I can damn well stop that.”

Solus blinked again. It was not a gesture of astonishment, but one of evaluation. “Formulating cure not necessary. Have that already. Need to aerosolize into environmental control systems. Vorcha guarding it, need to kill them. Think you can do that also?”

She ran her hand over her hair. “You know, just once it’d be nice to ask for help and have someone say sure, let’s go, no strings attached.”

“Life is a negotiation. We all want. We all give to get what we want.” He smiled, rather kindly. His gaze drifted briefly to her Cerberus-branded colleagues. “May have a grasp of this already.”

Shepard rubbed her forehead, unwilling to contest it. “So what exactly—”

One of the two thousand sounds assaulting her ears went silent. It was almost imperceptible against the din of mortal irritation and suffering, but to a human who’d lived her whole life in tin cans, its absence amounted to a shot of adrenaline. Her eyes went to the ventilation duct overhead.

Jacob evidently had similar instincts. “What the hell was that?”

Solus noted their attention and drew a quick conclusion. “Vorcha shut down air circulation fans. Trying to kill everyone. Need to get power back on before district runs out of oxygen for real. Might as well use plague cure, if you locate Daniel. Save time.”

“Why do we—”

“Tossed cure. Wanted to help people. Good motives, bad decisions. Need another three hours to synthesize more.” He tossed her an object. “Can aerosolize with this.”

“Right.” Shepard grabbed the thermos and secured it to her utility belt. Then she remembered. “I ran into a sick batarian back near the spaceward entrance. Can you send somebody? He’s in a bad way.”
He pursed his lips. “Hard to say. Mercs still at war. Quite dangerous. Will see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” She gave him a nod, re-captured Kasumi’s wandering attention, and led her squad out the back door of the clinic.

Miranda brought up her omni-tool, which had created a rough map of the district as they wandered and fit it into public maps of Omega. “We must be close. We’re running out of slum.”

Jacob rolled his shoulder and drew his rifle. “Should be a nice, easy stroll then.”

“Yeah.” Shepard snorted and checked her own gun. “Kasumi?”

“Present and accounted for.” She tossed off a sarcastic two-finger salute.

Shepard still found the informality of this operation strange, no less that she could be Kasumi while Shepard remained Shepard. Not that she particularly wanted to be Nathaly. Not to these people, not yet. “Think you can use that cloaking tech of yours for some old-fashioned scouting?”

“On it.” She vanished from sight. Shepard, Miranda, and Jacob advanced at a slower pace. A ramp led upwards through the neighborhood towards environmental control. Shepard had lost most sense of towards and away from the asteroid surface—rimward and hubward, in local parlance. Artificial gravity confused instinct, one of many reasons she preferred centripetal force aboard a station.

Kasumi reappeared. “There’s a vorcha blockade. This must be the right direction.”

“What kind of welcome are we looking at?”

“A dozen ground troops.” She shrugged, eloquent. “A few rocketeers setting up in the rafters. Nothing we can’t handle.”

She sighed, more resigned than worried. “I had my fill of rockets fighting the geth.”

“I suppose so.” Kasumi was all politeness. Shepard realized there was little reason for a young thief to have any experience of geth, and felt very old. It was hard to believe herself thirty-one already. There was a certain amount of psychological adjustment that came with thirty, and Shepard had been deprived of any adaptation.

Kaidan would be thirty-four. She felt too young to be dating a thirty-four-year-old. Not that they were dating, not anymore.

Kasumi prodded her. She flinched away from her fingers instinctively. Kasumi frowned. “Shep? Are we going or what?”

“No sign of Daniel?” Shepard asked as they started forward again, covering the mental lapse.

Kasumi shook her head. Jacob readied his gun. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ll deal with the rockets.” Shepard exchanged her M-15 for her sniper rifle. “The rest of you, keep the vorcha pinned down. I don’t want a melee.”

Miranda flexed her left hand, rotating the wrist and preparing for a biotic strike. “Understood.”

The ramp turned into a mezzanine overlooking a large warehouse. No sooner had Shepard stepped through the hatch than a rocket whistled out of the dark near the ceiling. She ducked sideways. The rocket exploded against the bulkhead. “Guess they’re ready. Move!”
Her squad scattered into cover. Shepard shoved up against a heavy crate and took quick stock. It was a good place, the vorcha below, taking what cover they could, but at a disadvantage. And the rocket-toting soldiers in the rafters didn’t number more than two or three.

Her sniper rifle unfolded. A vorcha snarled in her scope, baring his teeth, unaware of her attention. She squeezed the trigger. There was nothing to fault the action of these new rifles, regardless of the confounding stupidity of the heat sinks. Three clean shots left the barrel before the thing barely twitched in her hands. It was so smooth she was able to track the target as she fired, following him down to the floor. His rocket went wide and smacked into the bulkhead over her squad’s heads.

Shepard lifted her head from the scope and smiled.

Bullets flew. Vorcha screeched, with battle-lust and pain alike. Her squad, professional, focused, was mostly silent aside from a few shouted instructions, and Kasumi’s delighted laughter as she surprised an opponent. A vorcha tried to sneak underneath their balcony, out of their line of fire, but Miranda lashed out with a biotic attack. He rose into the air and smacked into the ground with bone-shattering force.

Shepard was too far away to feel any painful pulse of reaction in her head, and anyway so much adrenaline was pouring through her that she doubted she would have noticed or cared. It’d been building, one fight after the next as they pushed through the district, into a hyperaware calm, familiar and welcome. Almost as though she never died.

Vorcha, charging up the stairs, flanking her team. She brought the rifle up. She had entire eons to settle it in place and take her aim. Even their mouths screamed at a glacial pace, her squad barely starting to turn. They didn’t have a chance. Shepard switched targets as she felt the first shot leave the barrel. Then the second. Three vorcha fell. She sensed as much as saw the second rocketeer stand and fire.

Lazily, she leaned back into the cover of the crate. It sailed by her shoulder. She snorted her laughter. Shepard took aim before it exploded against the wall and dropped him a moment later.

The rifle was overheated. She released it and had her pistol drawn before it clattered on the floor.

A screech of rage came from below. She stepped to the edge and fired. Then Miranda yelled. “Shepard!”

A vorcha had powered through her team and barreled towards her, teeth bared and a flamethrower clamped in his hands. Her mouth thinned, highly annoyed.

As his finger began to open the nozzle, Shepard’s heel caved in the side of his knee. The jet of flame swung wide as he toppled over. A second kick relieved him on his weapon, which fell silent as the valve shut. She planted her foot on his chest and leveled her pistol. Then, because she was sick of the constant caterwauling, she fired into his throat before sending a bullet through his head. Then she turned to the next one up the stairs, and the one after that, until no more came.

Then there was silence.

Shepard stepped off the corpse and exchanged her thermal clip. The motion was already becoming habit. The quiet continued undisturbed, despite the end of the fight and a general relaxation of tension. She glanced up, and found her entire team staring at her.

“What?” she asked, bluntly, knowing exactly what. That self-satisfied and wholly inappropriate
grin still tugged at her mouth despite her best efforts to suppress it. The floor about her feet was littered with vorcha. She covered by retrieving the sniper rifle and replacing its heat sink.

Even Kasumi seemed unsettled. Miranda pursed her lips. Jacob, who never failed to elect himself to unpleasant tasks when everyone else declined, cleared his throat. “Nice reflexes.”

“It seems to be coming back to me.” She strode past them, folding away the other guns into their places and drawing her assault rifle. “Environmental control is just ahead.”

They went down the stairs and through a large hatch. The room beyond was a massive, vaulted space crudely carved from the asteroid and papered over with sheet metal. Even with the fans deactivated, the walls thrummed with energy waiting to be put to use, a low bass rumble that got into her bones. She suspected if she placed a thermal clip on any of the surfaces, it would skate around and tumble to the floor courtesy of vibration.

At the back, a trio of vorcha argued with a squad of batarians. One of the batarians had a firm grip on a frightened human in a medical tunic. “We found this one lurking nearby, trying to infect our quarter of the district.”

The doctor raised his head. “I was trying to cure the plague, you witless—”

“Quiet!” His batarian handler elbowed him in the gut, hard, and addressed the vorcha. “If you’re replacing the Suns around here, you better clear out this plague-spreading human scum. Or you won’t last, either.”

The vorcha hissed, baring his pointed teeth. “Human doctors not our problem. Plague destroy Blue Suns! Plague destroy you too!”

“No one needs to be destroyed,” the doctor pleaded, doubled over and retching. “Please, if you give me back my medical bag—”

The batarian slapped him across the mouth, sending him sprawling to the floor. “I said, shut up!”

Shepard crept closer, sticking to cover with her rifle drawn, and watched the man try to raise himself. Blood dripped from his mouth. Meanwhile, the batarians and vorcha sized each other up with narrowed eyes and twitchy fingers. She motioned her squad to hang back. If a fight broke out, it would only make their job easier.

So, naturally, the doctor caught sight of them, and before Shepard could gesture a warning, started screaming for help. “They’ll destroy the cure! You have to do something!”

Immediately, six heads and eighteen eyes swiveled towards her team. Shepard shrugged to herself. She liked it better this way, anyhow. Stepping away from the bulkhead, she raised her assault rifle and aimed it at the group. “Let him go.”

A batarian reached for his pistol. “What the—”

Shepard let off a warning shot. “Don’t move.” Her gaze shifted to the vorcha. “Game over. We’re here to end this little experiment.”

Realization dawned. The vorcha howled. “You come from clinic! Put cure in air! We kill you first!”

And then, suddenly, all of the batarian attention was back to the vorcha. “Wait. They really have a cure?”
Shepard took another step forward, incidentally carrying her closer to an HVAC unit that would provide some cover when the bullets started flying. “Far as I can tell, the Blood Pack released the plague to wipe out the Suns and didn’t care much about the collateral damage.”

“But humans are immune.” The batarians exchanged confused glances. “It has to be human.”

“Coincidence,” Shepard said, because it was easier than explaining about the Collectors and their fixation on her species.

The vorcha were out of patience. “We fight! We win! You not take slums from us!”

The most enraged of them fired his rifle. The batarians drew their guns and began shooting at the vorcha. Shepard took aim, but the doctor, Daniel, stumbled to his feet and into her line of fire, with his hands raised. “Don’t hurt them!”

Jacob snorted. “This kid serious?”

“Get him out of there.” Shepard hunkered down behind the ducting.

“On it,” Kasumi said, and vanished under her electronic cloak.

Miranda swiveled in place and dove down a side ramp as a rocket flew straight through the spot where she’d been standing. “On our six!”

Shepard cursed and eyed the gallery. From the hallways came the sound of pounding feet and hissing screeches. They were about to be flanked on all sides. “Move up!”

“Are you crazy?” Jacob crouched near Miranda, taking pot shots when he could— which wasn’t often.

“Do it!” There wasn’t any time to argue. Shepard laid down a burst of fire, and ran ahead, vaulting over the HVAC unit and closing the gap. Kasumi dragged Daniel under a desk flanking the air control unit. Batarians and vorcha continued to exchange fire, neither group trained enough to make much of a dent in the other.

Shepard used up a second taking in the scene before changing trajectory to flank the vorcha. Kasumi understood her intention and peppered the vorcha from behind. It was enough for the batarians to gain the upper hand.

One of them glanced at Shepard with confusion—and deep suspicion—as she crouched behind a huge pipe and waved the rest of her squad in. “Why do humans care about a plague that doesn’t hurt you?”

She put a bullet in the chest of a vorcha lugging a flamethrower up the room. Their backs were now to the central environmental control. No possibility of being flanked. “The scientist who made the cure is salarian.”

Something like understanding crossed his face. “And he hired you to deploy it.”

“Something like that.” Shepard turned to Jacob as he fell in beside her. “Where’s Miranda?”

“Pinned down in one of the side passages,” he panted, swiping his hand over his face to get the sweat out of his eyes. “I couldn’t reach her.”

As if to emphasize his point, a rocket shook the pipe. It was half a meter in diameter and made of
good thick steel, but it wouldn’t hold forever. A platoon of vorcha were on the ground taking up
the room’s remaining cover, and ensuring none of them could get a break while the rocketeers
above reloaded. As soon as one fell, another took its place.

She yelled in Jacob’s ear, overcoming the noise of the fight. “How many can you lift?”

“Two. Maybe three if they’re close.”

“Put them in the path of those rockets.” She looked past him at the batarians. “Keep the vorcha
pinned down.”

“They’re hard to hit,” one growled. His pistol was civilian-issue, the kind people used for self-
defense rather than intentional killing.

She shook her head. “I don’t care if you hit them. Just make it too dangerous for them to move.”

Between the rockets firing, Jacob levered himself up and flung his biotic strike across the room,
and sending a searing flash of pressure lancing through Shepard’s skull. By the time the stars
stopped dancing over her sight, three vorcha hung screaming in the air, revolving slowly and
making it difficult for the rocketeers or even those at the back on the ground to get a clear shot.

She darted forward, using the chaos as cover, and made for Miranda’s position.

Miranda was holding her own; between biotics that left Shepard’s head ringing like gong and artful
use of her SMG, Miranda kept the space around her clear. Shepard acknowledged some grudging
admiration for her immense skill. It didn’t make her like her any better.

But it was all Miranda could do to hold position. She couldn’t advance, or even withdraw. The
vorcha would be on her in a second. She was whirl of motion, not even noticing Shepard’s
approach, until Shepard blew off the head of a cretin about to flank her.

That earned her a single, quick glance, before Miranda whirled on another vorcha and slammed her
boot into his face. She gasped out directions. “Fan controls are back this way.”

Shepard, less elegant, swung the butt of her rifle into a charging enemy and followed it with a
heavy stomp to his chest. He wheezed once, heavily, and did not rise. “Clear this lot out first.”

She shook her head, sweat-soaked locks of black hair whipping over her face. “They’ve got
numbers. We take the fans, disperse the cure, they lose. No reason to stay and keep dying.”

“Allright.” So many vorcha had flooded environmental control that she didn’t much like their odds
in an extended fight, anyway. She nodded down the hall. “Go. I’ll cover you.”

Miranda sped ahead. She darted back and forth, twisting away from the vorcha’s gunfire like she
was made of smoke, her step as light and sure in her high-heel boots as if they were running shoes.
With fluid grace, she tucked herself against a wall and began laying down cover fire.

Shepard barreled down the corridor, firing as she ran, trusting in her suit shield and her aim.
Though she was struck several times, she managed to take out three of the vorcha before they
could shoot. Between the pair of them, by the time Shepard reached Miranda’s position, the
enemy ranks were considerably thinner.

And so they proceeded to the fan controls. Miranda fought like an acrobat or a spy, all agility and
finesse. Shepard fought like someone who did it for a living, with workmanlike expertise. Both
methods proved devastating to their vorcha opponents. They arrived at the control room with
every enemy from the hallway dead behind them. Shepard found the switch and threw it. The fans hummed to life. “Now we just have to get that cure into the vents.”

Miranda looked back towards the main room, out of sight. “Where’s Daniel?”

At that moment, the air in the doorway shimmered. Shepard had her gun raised before her mind finished registering the movement. Kasumi materialized from under her cloak and smirked. She held up an insulated flask. “The doc’s assistant had this in his kit.”

She tossed it to Shepard.

Shepard grinned and poured it into Mordin’s aerosolizer. “Good work.”

“Give it here. I’ll get it loaded.” Miranda slotted the can into the fan intake. There was a brief hiss as its contents began to disperse through the system.

“Clean up?” Shepard suggested.

Kasumi nodded towards the canister. “I’ll stay here. Stand guard in case one of the vermin gets ideas.”

Shepard and Miranda returned to the fight. Vorcha corpses littered the floor, and those left alive attempted to flee rather than fight. The batarians were dead as well, victims of the crossfire. Jacob crouched near Daniel. The doctor had gone pale, shaking, with his hands clamped tightly over his head.

The three of them dispatched with the last of the vorcha. When the dust settled and it was clear no further attacks were imminent, Shepard approached the young man and offered her hand. “It’s over now.”

He regarded it like a serpent. “You just—you killed them.”

“They would have killed you,” she replied, mildly.

“You don’t know that.” His eyes were full of hatred. “I came here to help. They would have listened if you gave them a chance. Instead, you took advantage of their distrust.”

“I disagree.” She glanced at the dead and shrugged. “Moot point now.”

“Yes, it is,” he answered bitterly. With his dignity wrapped about him like an icy veil, he rose on his own, ignoring her offer of assistance, and marched past them. Shepard watched him retrieve his case.

Jacob caught her attention. “I radioed the doc. He’s on his way.”

Daniel cut in before she could respond. “Good. We’ll see what Doctor Solus has to say about this.”

Shepard massaged her forehead. “You know, I really hate this station.”
Alenko hadn’t expected the restaurant to be this crowded. The buzz of the other patrons made it hard to hear anything, and the close quarters left the impression of eating in someone’s lap. His old friend, Matsuo, had asked to meet him for lunch and chosen this place. Alenko couldn’t imagine why.

Mat stuffed a french fry into his mouth, chewed and swallowed. “I have a proposition for you.”

Alenko narrowed his eyes over his hamburger. Mat had been overly bright and chatty since he arrived. Alenko had known him long enough to suspect an ulterior motive.

Mat continued, “There’s this guy I know.”

“Oh, please, no,” Alenko groaned, understanding immediately where this was going.

“He’s just getting out of a nasty breakup.” Mat overrode the objection as if it never happened. “So kind of like you, he’s not looking for anything serious, just trying to get back in the game.”

“Only I’m not trying to get back in the game.”

“It’s been two years.”

“I didn’t realize there was a statute of limitations on getting over my girlfriend’s death.” Said with an edge, warning Mat off this subject.

Unsurprisingly, that barb was also summarily ignored. “He’s a doctor, he’s smart, stable, all that good stuff. And he plays guitar in a cover band.”

Alenko gave him a sullen glare. “I got over musicians when I was about twelve.”

“You’re lying,” Mat said cheerfully. He ate another fry, taking his time dragging it through the ketchup. “He’s Hadley’s pediatrician. I’ve known him since she was about twenty minutes old, and seeing as she spent a lot of those first hours barely breathing, the fact that we still speak is a positive sign.”

Alenko, who had heard altogether too many anecdotes about the birth of Mat’s daughter for someone not directly involved in the event, from him and Alex alike, schooled his expression and tried to avoid segueing into another parental war story. “No offense Mat, but I kind of doubt his bedside manner is relevant to my situation.”

“He’s a good guy. And the navy sent him to medical school, so he gets all this semper fi war shit, which I know is important to you.”

His expression flattened. “Semper fi war shit.”

“You know what I mean.” He waved his hand, impatient. “Look, Kaidan, Alex and I care about you a lot. All you’ve done in the eighteen months since you got reactivated is work and sleep. There is more to life than that.”

“That’s not true. I go out. I’m having lunch with you right now. I’m not a shut-in.”
“Yeah? When was the last time before this?”

“Last Saturday, actually. But let me guess, it doesn’t count if it wasn’t a date.”

“And actively avoiding dating is super-healthy, right?” Mat sat back. “The last time we all went out together, I swear at least three people tried to hit on you, and I don’t think you even noticed. It was maddening when we were in school, but now it’s just kind of sad.”

He had noticed. He just wasn’t interested. Alenko set the burger down, having lost all appetite. “It wasn’t a breakup, and it wasn’t a fling. She—I’ve never felt like that about anybody. I don’t want…”

“How is it disrespectful to her memory if you sit down with another human being and have a drink?” Mat demanded. “How is honoring her memory to spend the rest of your life bored and miserable?”

“I’m not bored.”

“Yeah, okay.” He sat back and folded his arms. “You jumped at the chance to get out of your office for lunch.”

“Because I wasn’t expecting an ambush.” Alenko started to get up. “I should have expected this crap after you called C-Sec on me—”

His friend also rose. “You dropped completely off the radar. The last time that happened I wound up sitting with you in the hospital for two days, or don’t you remember?”

The steam went out of Alenko. He looked away, mumbling. “That was fifteen years ago.”

“This felt about the same.” Mat wasn’t done. “Yeah, I checked up on you. Don’t hold your breath waiting for an apology.”

Going straight from BAaT to university was a mistake, in hindsight. He hadn’t dealt well with the transition and he wasn’t over what had happened with Vyrnnus and Rahna. He made a dumb decision. Mat was convinced it was deliberate, when in truth it was an accident, but the outcome was the same. He would have died if Mat hadn’t found him.

Alenko didn’t appreciate the reminder. But he was sick of having stupid fights with his friends. He reached for calm, though he couldn’t completely erase the bite in his voice. “What does that have to do with my social life?”

Mat let out a breath and ramped down, his part to deescalate the argument. “Be pissed at me if you want. But what’s the worst that could happen if you went on one date? You waste an hour and a handful of credits? It’s not like you have other plans.”

“I’m not ready.” He crossed his arms, stubborn.

Mat folded his hands on the table and stared him down. “When, then?”

He snapped a reply without thinking. “When it stops hurting like this.”

Mat hesitated. Very gently, more than he’d been at any point in this conversation or any they’d had since Nathaly died, he said, “You might want to consider that it doesn’t work like that. We don’t just stop missing the people we love. That doesn’t mean we should stop living, too.”
Alenko ran his hand over his hair and glanced away. Lazarus Station, horrible as it was, felt like a kind of closure. Like he could finally start to move on even if he wasn’t sure he wanted to. After two years, there was a comforting familiarity to his grief. Loosening his grip, even a little, felt unsettling.

The worst of it was the offer did appeal to some small part of him. He was lonely. His colleagues and the few friends he had left were as overworked as him. And he liked flirting. He liked dating, for that matter, and it was pointless to remember he still wanted Nathaly when she wasn’t coming back.

Then Mat said, “Unless you’re just not into guys anymore.”

“Sure,” Kaidan said with elaborate sarcasm, sitting back. “It took thirty years but I finally got over that whole bisexual phase.”

Mat blanched. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it like— I was just—”

Alenko let him flounder for a few seconds longer before letting out a small snicker. His embarrassment turned to indignation. “You—”

He raised his eyebrows. “You dragged me out here to lecture me about my love life, and you’re mad I wound you up? Come on.”

“All I meant is your last few significant others have been women,” he replied, primly, and picked up another french fry. “Though seeing as that’s just coincidence, you should give some thought to the fact that girls are bad for you.”

“Did you ever leave the third grade?”

He waved a hand, impatient. “I’m not saying all guys have this problem, but you definitely have this problem. Something terrible always happens, and you always take it personally.”

Behind the banter, Mat’s eyes were worried. Alenko wondered how bad his life must look to inspire such concern. And it wasn’t like Mat was the first person to attempt an inquiry, delicate or otherwise, into this situation. He sat back and folded his arms, blowing out a breath. “I don’t know. Is he cute?”

Mat broke into a smile. “Tall, dark, looks like he stepped out of a shampoo ad, I swear to god.”

Alenko grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair. “One date. No promises.”

“Baby steps.” His relief was plain. It had required some courage to even make the suggestion. “When?”

Alenko already regretted saying yes, but was too proud to retract his consent. “I’m out of town for a week or so. Any time after that is fine.”

Mat’s matchmaker of an email arrived while Alenko was en route to the Titan Nebula, just before they went dark. This was quite the long haul for their little Starling, but Velasquez seemed excited by the challenge. “We discharged off an asteroid before heading through the relay, so we should be good to go right into orbit.”

“This still feels like our ass is hanging out,” Lieutenant Marshall grumbled. “What the hell was
that?"

Alenko silenced his omni-tool with a hint of embarrassment. "Email."

Jackson leaned over the pilot’s couch, staring out the port ahead. "All this fancy LO nonsense does seem like stopping bullets with cobwebs when we’re flying straight at our enemy without any kind of artillery."

Corvettes weren’t typically armed—not nearly enough room for a proper battery. Velasquez wasn’t concerned. "Please. I was running past Alliance patrols, not to mention merc lines which are a lot less delicate about dealing with smugglers, before any of you ever held a gun. And you better believe that rickety boat had no stealth capability, much less shields or cannons."

Alenko had heard her stories before. He wasn’t sure he believed the half of them. And staring at that barren planet growing larger out their window made him speak with more confidence than he felt. "It’ll work. It’s worked plenty of times."

Green crossed his arms. "Who knows what tech the Terminus has at its disposal. It’s not like they publish in journals."

Nguyen snorted. "Nobody publishes stealth shit in journals."

Alenko quietly recalled the unauthorized and alarming article published in an aerospace trade journal back in ’82, while his squad was training and the Normandy was in the final stages of construction. It speculated on the nature and implementation of the IES, with enough substantiating quotes from unnamed sources to have Anderson livid for the next two weeks. Adams shrugged and called it typical.

"Folks in the Terminus talk a big game," said Velasquez. "Truth is most organizations are worse off than in Council space. There’s just no infrastructure here to support big time R&D unless you have really deep pockets, and can build everything yourself. And in that case you tend to keep it to yourself."

They all stared at her. Velasquez shrugged. "I grew up in the deep Traverse. The part where the boundary with the Terminus gets blurry. You can’t tell me how it is out here."

Alenko estimated Velasquez was in her mid-twenties. The Alliance was barely into the Traverse when she was born. If she’d grown up in a border colony… that wouldn’t be that much different from the Terminus itself, in those days. And there was more exasperation than boasting in her explanation.

"Easy does it," Jackson said. They were all bunched up behind the pilot’s couch, silent, even the lights of the corvette’s control console dimmed. Staring ahead at the dark blot that was their destination. The Alliance never charted out here, and even Cerberus hadn’t bothered to give it a name. Just Lab 34-A and associated coordinates. Not entirely knowing what to expect, hoping like hell not to be seen.

Jackson leaned forward. "Easy—"

Alenko’s omni-tool flashed bright orange, blinding everyone in the cabin, to immediate yelps and groans.

"Sorry—" Alenko hastened to turn off the visual alert as well, only to have it go off two more times while he flicked through the settings. "Sorry, sorry."
“That thing’s been going off every ten minutes since we left,” Green complained. “What gives? Another family emergency?”

That with a little edge of good-natured sarcasm. It hadn’t escaped notice that the Lazarus data showed up around the same time Alenko returned from leave. But Liara being Benezia’s daughter did him some favors; nobody on the squad questioned that she might be involved in anything strange.

He was embarrassed all the same. “No.” Then, as their questioning stares failed to dissipate, “A friend set me up on a blind date. He’s more excited about it than I am.”

“Wow,” Marshall said. “I had no idea you were interested in that.”

North gave him a withering glance. He harrumphed. “I can’t be the only one to ever think it.”

“I met my boyfriend on a blind date,” Velasquez offered, cheerfully. “We went to a biotiball game. Turns out we both hate biotiball but we went to two more before somebody finally broke down and confessed.”

That only made him more self-conscious. He put away the omni-tool. “Yeah, I’m not even sure I’m going to go.”

“You can’t just stand them up.” North was aghast.

Alenko felt he was rapidly losing control of the conversation. “I never said that.”

Then Nguyen spoke. “It’s good. You should go.”

His brow furrowed as he glanced her way. That was possibly the nicest thing Nguyen had ever said directly to him. She shrugged and turned back to the front port.

“If we’re quite finished dissecting Alenko’s personal life, we still have a mission.” Jackson fiddled with the radio. She was still annoyed about his edits of the Lazarus files. “Not much chatter on the comm.”

At this distance, they’d expect to overhear short-range communications between hab modules on the base. Nepheron had been nearly as inhospitable and out of the way as this world, and that alone convinced Alenko they’d stumbled on a major find. That, and Archer’s name attached to it.

Marshall adjusted the LADAR console. “No. But get a look at this.”

Navy systems had gotten really good at analyzing those little blips and telling their pilots what they were. This craft was totally unknown.

Velasquez frowned. “It’s like a really small frigate. Doesn’t fit well with existing ship class schemes.”

Alenko stared at the signature on the Starling’s LADAR screen. He couldn’t make any more sense of it than the rest of his squad. But it made the hair on his neck stand up.

“It’s definitely not Cerberus,” Jackson said. Her tone was concerned, but not yet alarmed.

“No.” Velasquez shifted her attention back to piloting their corvette. “Not the Suns either.”

The last pick-up registered by the Blue Suns derelict was in this nebula. “So Cerberus and mercs aren’t the only ones visiting this rock.”
“No.” Their pilot’s mouth settled into a grimace.

Alenko spoke slowly. “Something went wrong here. We should abort the mission.”

“Approval to conduct ops in the Terminus doesn’t come every day. And this is our only bridge from Lazarus cell to Nephilim.” Jackson retreated to the aft of their ship, picking up her weapons and strapping them into place. “We’re not aborting. We need this intel.”

Alenko followed her. “I’m just saying, this might not be Cerberus at all.”

“That may be true. I don’t see it changes much.” She nodded at them. “Get your gear. We’re going in.”

Velasquez sailed past the unknown ship and landed on the regolith with a small flourish. Alenko didn’t like the sight of it hanging in the sky over the Cerberus base. It looked like nothing he’d ever seen, as much rock as metal. He was damned how it even flew.


“Alenko,” Jackson said, redirecting his attention. “Move it.”

He hurried after the rest of his squad.

Out on the planet’s surface, everything was a deep gray cloaked in silence. The stars hung overhead like diamonds cut into glass, the arc of the galaxy a pale splash, desolate at the very edge of its rim. The system’s star hugged the horizon, dragging long shadows over the pulverized dust that was the only terrain. Even the craters lay buried with only the barest tips of their rims peeking out.

Alenko picked his way over the ground carefully, mindful of the weak gravity. It wouldn’t take much to achieve escape velocity. This planet barely managed to pull itself into a sphere.

Cerberus set down several pillbox pre-fab habs and buried them deep in the ground. They’d even shoveled regolith onto the roofs as a radiation shield, but not too thickly, as the structures weren’t intended to support the weight. It was with some trepidation that Alenko descended into the ground and passed through the airlock to the first hab.

North tried the lights. “Power’s down for non-essential systems.”

Alenko flicked on the flashlight mounted to his rifle. His beam immediately lit on a man sprawled across the corridor. His dead face was frozen in astonishment.

Marshall squatted beside him. “Not a mark on this guy.”

Nguyen raised her gun, staring further down the hall as if expecting an attack at any moment. “Just like on that derelict ship.”

“Wait.” Green knelt and rolled the corpse on its side. “There’s a hole in his shirt.”

Alenko joined him. “What the hell?”

The tear was the size of his thumb. Alenko prodded it, and then he pulled open the man’s shirt to get a better look, and found a deep puncture wound. “Hardly any blood.”
“Maybe there was a coagulant in whatever did this to him.” Jackson stepped over the body. “Look. More.”

They found two more men and a woman in similar condition. North shook her head. “We didn’t see any wounds on the pair we found on the ship.”

Alenko shrugged. “We didn’t exactly strip them down. It would be easy to miss.”

“Doesn’t give us a lot of clues,” Nguyen said, from further up the hall. “This place is a tomb.”

Ahead were more bodies. Each one looked as surprised as the first. Alenko grew more disturbed. “None of them had any time to react.”

“There’s no environmental control.” North’s breathing was labored over the comm, deep and rapid. “This air’s almost pure CO2.”

Jackson kept her attention ahead. “Easy, private. Easy.”

“Why would they turn off the environmental control?”

Alenko opened his mouth, not knowing what he would say, but certain that edge of hysteria required immediate remedy. But Nguyen beat him to it. “You ask me, a no-atmosphere party sounds like exactly the sort of shindig Cerberus would throw.”

North blinked. Nguyen offered her a broad if slightly nasty smile behind her helmet’s polycarbonate mask, but none of the acid was for North, but rather for the Cerberus personnel scattered around them. North let out a small chuckle despite herself.

“Pressure’s fine, but circulation’s dead.” Marshall was perfectly calm, but seemed to share North’s concern, if not her nerves. “Alenko’s right. Something’s off. We should go.”

“No.” Jackson continued into the facility. “No, damn it. We’ll never be back here.”

She surged ahead, Green and Marshall at her heels, North stumbling after, and Nguyen and Alenko bringing up the rear. Alенко hung back. That ship outside was bothering him. Maybe it hadn’t seen their corvette come in, but it seemed absurd to imagine it hadn’t seen them cross the barren landscape to the hab. They were well within visual range. Maybe the other ship was done, whoever or whatever they were, or maybe not. Alenko was betting on not.

He was on alert, in a state of elevated anticipation that was undeniably a little eager, but he didn’t live for situations like this. Not like Nathaly had. She thrived on the fight, the uncertainty, the challenge. He envied that, sometimes. She’d walk into this dark awaiting them with as much excitement as nerves.

Even Jackson just wanted this done, as much as she might have trained in Villa Militar, same as Nathaly. It wasn’t fun. It was just the job. “This looks like a lab.”

Alenko’s rifle-mounted flashlight swept the area. They were in a large room, subdivided into cells. Not so much prison cells as areas for individual work, isolated from the rest by walls on three sides. Each had odd stains on their bulkheads, wear and dents. Weights scattered the floors. There was no seating or places to rest of any kind. It was weirdly familiar, pricking at his subconscious.

Nguyen’s light flashed against the walls, climbed up to the ceiling, spilled erratically over the equipment. She bent and picked up an odd cap, covered with wireless sensors, big as a football
helmet. “What the hell?”

He stepped into one of the open cells, his feet sliding into stance without any conscious intent. David Tan to his left, grunting as he lifted a weight and suspended it in midair as their instructor made notes. Rahma sweaty and miserable to his right, flinging the discs into the wall with an almost dissociative level of mechanical detachment. A computer automatically logged the force of each strike.

Alenko took a shaky breath. “It’s Jump Zero.”


“They had rooms like this on Jump Zero, for biotics to exercise their abilities. They wanted to measure us.” He ignored their sudden stares, his blood running too high to care. “Cerberus had biotics here. They had them flinging the weights around to test them. That’s the dents on the walls.”

North’s voice quavered. “And the stains?”

“Well, they’re sure as hell not spaghetti sauce.” Alenko looked around. “Where are their prisoners?”

“You don’t know they weren’t here voluntarily,” said Jackson, but she didn’t have much strength of conviction. The stains were very compelling.

Green crowded back against them. “What’s that?”

In his flashlight beam lay several dead insectoid shapes, the length of Alenko’s forearm and armed with stingers of the right size to have impaled the victims they already found. The squad drew together as almost one body.

Nguyen’s whisper was harsh in the silence. “Let’s find these bastards.”

A crash echoed from the depths of the hab awaiting them ahead. All of their flashlights flicked towards the noise.

Jackson’s face was grim. “Be ready.”

North’s breathing shot through the roof. Alenko had harbored concerns since North first stepped off their corvette, but now they ratcheted up to active alarm. North froze up with the husks on the derelict ship. God only knew what would come at them out of the dark this time.

He thought about sending her back to wait with Velasquez, but it was too late. Jackson moved up, the group following tightly. There wasn’t even a moment to talk to North, calm her down or issue instructions.

Instead, he hung close to her, ready to act if necessary. He’d never lost anyone to friendly fire and didn’t intend to start today.

Another crash, and then shouting. They hustled down a passageway and burst into a room.

Three humans, unarmed and unarmored, equipped with scavenged breather masks, faced off against a pair of aliens. Desks and cabinets lay overturned, papers falling like confetti. Terminal screens blinked erratically from the floor, the walls flickering with their orange light.
The person nearest Alenko bled heavily from her upper arm. That didn’t stop her from raising a glowing blue fist and sending an alien flying up into the ceiling.

It barely felt the blow. As it began to rise, Alenko instinctively smacked it back with a biotic slap, much harder, into the bulkhead. Its meaty triangular head met it with a pulpy thud. The woman turned, her face a caricature of surprise.

“Get down!” Jackson yelled, loud enough to penetrate her helmet.

The three prisoners hit the deck. The squad opened fire.

The alien still on its feet glowed blue all over—a biotic barrier—and responded in kind. Its assault rifle put out a tiny swarm of needle-like bullets at an absolutely blurring rate, zinging into their shields and eroding them with sheer numbers. Alenko doubled his own barrier.

Jackson’s shield gave out and she dove behind an upturned desk, swiftly followed by Marshall. Meanwhile the first alien still wasn’t out. It rose on only slightly wobbly legs and groped at its own weapon. Alenko was momentarily disconcerted. The back of its head was stove-in, but still, it moved.

Nguyen didn’t pause to contemplate the existential implications. She peppered its chest. It stumbled back. Green pinned it there with his rifle. It sagged.

Alenko kept the second one occupied, drawing its fire away from Jackson and Marshall, trying to give them room to recoup. His shots slid off its barrier. Damn, but the thing was strong.

His rifle was near overheating and he didn’t have a moment to chuck the thermal clip. “North!”

He backed up a step involuntarily as the alien sensed weakness and advanced. Then he caught Private North out of the corner of his eye, cowering in the lee of a filing cabinet, her hands over her head and her gun on the ground at her side. Alenko cursed. “Shit.”

The person on the floor closest to the alien abruptly threw himself at its knees in an awkward tackle. It bought Alenko a second to draw his pistol and send several shots at the alien’s four glowing eyes. Its head snapped back. Jackson and Marshall came out of cover and pounded into it with a steady hail of bullets. The barrier vanished. It stumbled backwards. It didn’t bleed, exactly. Its body seemed to be nothing but dry chitin with a little muscle to hold it all together.

Nguyen closed with her opponent and smashed its face with the butt of her rifle. She followed this with a swift kick that took its legs out from under it. Then she shot it again for good measure. Her color was high, her cheeks red and fierce, her eyes on fire. At that moment she was almost more a weapon herself.


That big, strange ship hovering in the air over the base. Apparently it wasn’t done yet.

Jackson didn’t blink before she slammed the hatch shut, and shot out the locking pad. “Get the civilians to the back. Form up behind the desks.”

He dragged the nearest biotic to her feet and got her to the far end of the room. She was shaking all over. He also couldn’t help but notice how thin her arm was in his grasp, or that her shirt was positively threadbare. Or that the deep cut on her arm was one of several half-healed injuries.

Alenko had hated Cerberus since they toured the lab on Nepheron after capturing the base. But at
times it flared into something hotter and less abstract.

He got her settled as quickly and gently as he could. “Stay here. Keep your head down. You’re going to be fine.”

She nodded. He huddled behind one of desks Marshall and Green had dragged into position. The pile of furniture would provide some cover, and hopefully the hatch would be a bottleneck. He had no confidence it would hold indefinitely, and even if it did, they had to leave somehow.

Sure enough, the metal began to whine, and he saw a crack of light appear at the bottom as the door panel began to rise. That was also the moment he noticed North was not with them behind the barricade.

“Private North!” He couldn’t see her at all, but with a sinking feeling, he knew exactly where she was.

Sure enough, her pale, frightened face peeked out from around the hefty file cabinet. It offered good cover from the two dead aliens. It offered no cover from the hallway.

Jackson noticed too. “North! Get your ass over here!”

North swallowed. Shook her head. Alenko felt the hope go out of him. She was too scared to move, and she’d die if didn’t.

The door was now a third of the way open. They could see a crowd of alien legs, and a few pairs of spindle-fingered hands straining to lift it further. A little more and they’d be able to duck under.

The whole squad was screaming at her now. Marshall tried discipline. “Marine, get on your feet!”

Nguyen was less delicate. “Suck it up! Save yourself! Move!”

“North!” Green was just yelling indiscriminately. “Shit! Fuck! North!”

She sat there shaking her head. Shaking everywhere, really. Alenko’s eyes shifted from her to the door and back, trying to think of something, anything.

It came to him just as the hatch passed the halfway point and the first alien ducked down to come through. He stood up to get a clear line of sight.

Jackson clearly thought he’d lost his mind. “Alenko, get down!”

He sent a wave of biotic energy at North and she accelerated into the air with a half-strangled scream and bumped against the ceiling. Not hard enough to hurt. But high enough to get her clear as the aliens poured into the room.

As the most obvious target, the rain of needle bullets rained down on him like hail. His shields collapsed as he was still plummeting back into cover. The last stray shot tore into his bicep, right between the ceramic armor plating. He poked at it, and his fingers came away wet. “No good deed unpunished.”

It didn’t hurt yet. He hoped that was the adrenaline and not a sign of something worse.

Beside him Nguyen screamed her defiance and poured fire into the first aliens through the hatch. On his other side Green and Marshall took turns, firing until their clips overheated, and going back into cover. Alenko packed medi-gel into the wound as best he could—he couldn’t really reach it
without removing his hardsuit.

“Keep it up!” Jackson’s rifle pounded staccato.

Alenko finished up and got back to fighting, resting his gun on top of the desk and picking a target. They’d stopped prying open the hatch so they couldn’t get more than one alien into the room at a time, sluggish, but each one took an awful lot to put down and the aliens were slowly gaining ground.

North continued to hover overhead, unnoticed for now, but Alenko knew the field wouldn’t hold much longer and he’d never gotten the trick of renewing a field before it failed. She’d fall right into the middle of the hostiles. And he didn’t think he had the delicate control necessary to move her anywhere else, not in the middle of a firefight with his concentration divided. Odds were he’d use too much force and pulp her.

Then the female biotic civilian crawled up to the barricade. Alenko spared her half a glance. “Get back—”

She raised a glowing hand and made a tugging gesture. North began to move towards them, quickly, but not so quickly she’d break against the wall. Behind her faceplate, her eyes squeezed shut.

Alenko waved his arm at the remaining civilians. “Make a hole!”

They looked puzzled for a moment, but then caught sight of North sailing in and scrambled out of the way. She collided with the wall and fell the last two meters to the ground. Alenko looked at the biotic. “Keep her down.”

She nodded and scrambled back. Alenko returned to the fight. Now there were four aliens in the room, two badly damaged. None of them had produced a barrier. He got to work on the worst off and it soon fell, not so much dying as collapsing inward and not rising. Almost like these creatures weren’t truly alive.

A fifth crowded into the room. Alenko got lucky and trapped it in a stasis field as it crawled under the door, effectively blocking the way. Another alien went down courtesy of his squad. The remaining pair looked nervous.

Jackson redirected her fire. “Ten o’clock!”

They all took aim at the alien on the left. It stumbled back under the barrage.

Then the one on the right arced its back and spread its arms. Every muscle went rigid as it lifted twenty centimeters into the air, covered in rippling golden light. Extensive cybernetics wired into its flesh began to glow, like cracks in armor.

For the first time this mission, Alenko felt real fear. Because he recognized what was happening immediately. Long after he’d forgotten his own name, he’d remember Saren’s corpse rising up in the council chamber, twitching and straining as Sovereign claimed him for a puppet.

“Two o’clock!” He fired into the apparition with absolute abandon, not caring if he overheated the rifle, not caring that he was out of cover and exposed. “Bring it down!”

Something in his voice got every one of them to switch, even Jackson. But it was like the light itself soaked up their shots. Nothing reached it. And then, as the alien set back down on its feet, a blue barrier shimmered around its spindly limbs. Cracks formed in its chitinous skin, flooded with
that eerie, shimmering light, like the lines of red Sovereign pumped into Saren at the very end.

Its eyes fixed on Alenko, and it raised one skeletal hand.

He had never been particularly sensitive to biotic attacks, but every biotic of any species had some level of sensitivity. This attack warbled through his brain like shooting at jelly. It threw him off-balance. And then, as it hit, every single one of the Alliance marines bunched up behind the makeshift barriers staggered back.

The alien raised its rifle and advanced on the team, firing steadily. The alien in stasis beneath the door began to move again.

Predictably, Nguyen shook it off first. She got her gun back up and shot at the nearest alien, cursing fluently. It probably saved their lives. The alien turned to her with glacial slowness, utterly unconcerned with the barrage.

Nguyen’s shield failed. Alenko held down the trigger. Someone near him was shouting. The alien’s barrier dissolved. Another two bullets sank into its flesh.

Just like that, the alien collapsed, folding up like a rotting house, the beams collapsing and the walls falling in after them, until all that remained was a pile of bone shards and sludgy ash.

After that it was just mop-up. The aliens didn’t have many units left on the ground. Velasquez radioed shortly after the last alien fell. “Starling to ground. The unknown ship is pulling out.”

Jackson raised her hand to her helmet, a gesture as unconscious and automatic as it was unnecessary. Her voice was distant. “Roger that, Starling. Cleaning up here.”

North huddled with the civilians. She was shaking all over. Green took a step towards her. “What the hell—”

Nguyen planted herself between them. “You got a problem?”

“We had to do this down a man because the panic princess here couldn’t do her damn job!” Green made to go around her, towards North, who shrank against the bulkhead.

Nguyen put her hand to his chest to halt him, her splintery mechanical fingers splayed out across his suit, aggression in every line.

“Enough,” Jackson said. Nguyen’s head snapped towards her, an ugly snarl already gathering on her lips. Jackson held up her hand. “Enough. Get them up.”

Nguyen stared at her a long moment, and then stalked defiantly towards the hatch, taking up guard in case any stragglers put in an appearance. Green muttered darkly, but began to help Marshall with the civilians.

Alenko spied something winking out of the dust and bones that had been the strange alien, the one possessed. He reached past every instinct waving him off and into the pile, and drew out an oblong device. Despite the layers of elastic webbing and the neoprene underlayers to protect him from suit abrasion, every nerve in his arm vibrated like an over tuned guitar string when he touched it, like a small electric shock.

But he picked it up anyway, turned it over and examined it. It was a dull green-black, lit with much brighter green lines, the proportions completely wrong to human eyes and deeply uncomfortable. It pulsed twice at his touch.
Jackson approached him. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know.” It had an evil, oily sheen like a living thing. Alenko wasn’t given to superstition, and the thought disturbed him. Instead, he turned to another topic. “I’ve seen that before. What happened with that… thing. When it lit up.”

“It’s like they’re not even alive.” She was disturbed as well. “No blood. Collapsing instead of dying. Disintegrating.”

“Yeah.” He reluctantly slid the device into a pouch and looked up at her. “That’s what Saren looked like. He killed himself and fell into the garden. Then Sovereign took him over through his cybernetics. It looked just like that, and he didn’t bleed anymore, either.”

He did not mention that procedure seemed to wring all the remaining blood from Saren’s corpse. Jackson licked her lips. “That’s impossible.”

But there was the barest hint of doubt.

Before he could say more, a choked sob came from aft. North was sitting up against the wall. “I’m sorry.”

Jackson gave him a final glance, and went to her. “What the hell happened, Private?”

She shook her head. Beneath her helmet mask, her face was soaked. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s just those things.”

Alenko got a depressing inkling. “Is this about the husks on the derelict?”

North gulped and shook her head again. “They came through the walls.”

Jackson gave him a confused glance. Alenko had an idea what she might mean. “She’s from Ninhursag. I’m guessing from her age she lived at home when…”

“They’re not people. People are ok.” She gulped air, her suit fan whining from the draw. “They’re just monsters.”

Well, that explained why she hadn’t shown any problems before. And he couldn’t fault her description. These aliens were… maybe not husks, but definitely not people either. He couldn’t begin to explain it.

Jackson looked at the three civilians. “What happened here?”

The woman’s voice was muffled by her breather mask. “Who are you?”

She blinked, a bit chagrined. “We’re from the Alliance navy, investigating Cerberus. I’m Major Jackson.”

The woman spat. “Cerberus.”

One of the others, a man just as ragged if less injured, took a breath. “We’ve been here for six months, give or take. Glad to see you. We’re nearly out of air.”

Jackson folded her weapon away, sliding it back into its holster on her back. “Why? What did Cerberus want with you?”

The three exchanged a glance. The man spoke again. “Nour and I are biotics. Luca not so much,
but they were trying.”

“Trying?” Alenko asked.

“Like on Trident,” said Marshall, looking grim. Alenko felt sick. Judging from the expressions written on the faces of the rest of his squad, he wasn’t the only one.

“Archer gave him some kind of drug. Surgeries.” Nour swallowed. “Said it would attune his nervous system. Ethan and I tried to tell him it was useless but he didn’t care.”

Jackson folded her arms. “And they’ve held you for six months?”

“They’ve held me for years,” said Ethan. “I was working for the Suns. Cerberus took our ship. Something about payment for a debt, a job unfinished. Then they took me to Nepheron.”

Alenko shook his head. “We shut down Nepheron.”

Ethan was indifferent. “They moved me before that, I guess. Along with the rest of Archer’s pets. I’m the only one left from that group.”

Alenko looked at Jackson. “Archer was the name Farrell used with Cerberus. It’s in the Lazarus logs.”

“I remember.” She turned back to the civilian biotics. “They experimented on you.”

Nour shuddered. “They pushed us to our limits. And then made us keep going, like if they just drove us hard enough, we’d turn into asari, or something.”

Alenko remembered being fifteen, when Commander Vyrnnus first arrived on Jump Zero and a dozen of them were sequestered into the advanced training program. The first day he had them face off in the gym and attack each other. He didn’t want sparring. He wanted blood.

None of them were scared. That came later, after disbelief and that brand of justified outrage that is so very irritating in the hands of teenagers got beaten out of them by long days of Vyrnnus demonstrating that if they wouldn’t fight each other, he was happy to let his own assistants off the leash. After the pathetic rebellion that proved they had no allies left among the human staff, either.

After they realized they had no option but compliance, then there was fear.

He forced his mind back to the present. If Alenko knew anything about Archer, it was his dedication to his research. Which concerned computers, not biotics. “What did Archer want?”

“Fuck if I know,” Luca said, speaking up at last, but without much passion. He was in the worst condition of the three, worn down to the bone. Old scars crisscrossed his shaven head. “He took nerve conduction measurements every day. Comparing us. He tried a spinal cell transplant on a few of the other non-biotics. They didn’t make it.”

Ethan shook his head. “Cerberus didn’t just want to explore biotic ability. They wanted to know how it worked. Why some people are biotics, and others aren’t, despite exposure. They wanted to engineer it.”

Nour glanced at him. “Archer talked sometimes about using mass effect fields in computational circuits for mechs. And something about interfaces. I didn’t understand it, but that’s how he treated us. Like equipment.”
Green scowled. “Was Archer here? When they attacked?”

They shook their heads. Alenko was tired of chasing a ghost. “He never is. Can you tell us anything about him? Where he went?”

The three survivors exchanged glances. Luca spoke. “He was upset. Cerberus gathered up our DNA and grew us out as clones, for sale, I think. But it didn’t work. Archer got summoned to Cronos Station.”

Marshall’s brow furrowed. “What’s at Cronos Station?”

“Think it’s like some kind of HQ. It was safe, anyway.” Luca made a disgusted noise. “He’d never take his brother otherwise. Only person he gave a single shit about beside himself. Only person he loved.”

“If you could call that love.” Nour simply looked ill. “David was a pet, too. Just not a lab rat.”

North shuddered violently. Green scoffed. Nguyen walked over, and drew her back without comment, steadying her as if she couldn’t quite find her feet on her own.

Marshall looked around the room. “And these aliens? They turned off your oxygen circulation, apparently some time ago, and killed most of the staff.”

“Cerberus called them Collectors.” Luca’s eyes were dull. “Think they bought the clones.”

Nour made a noise of assent, and didn’t disguise her revulsion. Ethan took up where Luca left off. “But apparently they weren’t satisfied with that. They came back and argued with Cerberus. Said the sale was for us, not copies. They took most of us away to their ship. We hid as long as we could.”

The half-eroded alien corpses lay in heaps across the floor. Alenko was baffled. “Those are Collectors?”

“So they said. I never heard of them before.”

North gulped. “We found clone tanks on the Cerberus derelict.”

“Empty tanks. Yeah.” That explained the attack on the ship. The Collectors felt they’d been duped, and they wanted to collect what they were owed. “I guess they traced the ship back here, too.”

“We need to get out of here.” Jackson addressed the civilians. “We’re headed back to Council space. You’re welcome to come with us, but I can’t stop and drop you off before we leave the Terminus. I’m sorry.”

Nour’s response was immediate. “We’ll go. This is no place to linger.”

They scavenged gear for the civilians and made haste back to the corvette. As they escorted the survivors to the ship, Velasquez looked on, shaking her head. “Life is never dull with you lot, I’ll give you that.”

“Sorry you keep drawing the short straw,” Jackson said, closing the hatch behind her squad. Citadel CT wasn’t big enough to rate a dedicated pilot, and they requested staff for their missions from the pool stationed at the Alliance outpost.
But Velasquez didn’t seem to mind. “Nah. I ask for runs like this. Reminds me of home.”

That earned her a few disbelieving looks. Jackson apparently decided it was best left alone. “Get us out of here.”

“Roger that.” None of the marines nor the civilians, nor Velasquez, wanted to hang around, not even on the chance of gathering additional data. None of them wanted to wait for the Collector ship to return.

The trip back to the Citadel took the better part of four days. Towards the end, Alenko sat at their makeshift dining table evaluating his wound. The rest of the squad lounged in various other awkward corners of the common room, trying to stay out of each other’s space. There was little privacy aboard a corvette, especially with three extra passengers, though the survivors slept most of the journey. It was probably the first real relaxation they’d had in months.

Jackson handed him a roll of gauze. “Don’t pick at it.”

He colored faintly, because he had been looking at it more often than strictly necessary. “Just changing out the dressing.”

She settled into a couch and folded her arms across her knees. “What is that thing you found?”

“Thing?” Marshall asked from across the cabin.

Alenko fished around in a pouch and set it on the table. It gleamed an evil green in the low light. “I probably shouldn’t have taken it with us.”

But he had to take it with them. It was their only clue.

The rest gathered around to get a look. Several extended their hands towards it, but only Nguyen was brave enough to actually make contact, albeit with her prosthetic only. It spun slowly on the tabletop.

Jackson was perplexed. “Why not take it?”

Alenko shook his head and returned to his task. The bullet passed clean through, but it still bled a bit, staining the white cloth. He added another layer. “Because it feels like the things the reapers left behind. Because something took over that Collector like Sovereign did Saren. Maybe this thing is how.”


“I don’t care whether any of you believe me. It’s what happened. Nathaly and twenty-two other people died for that truth.” Alenko tied off the gauze and gave her his full attention. “It wasn’t a geth ship that attacked the Normandy. I don’t know what it was, but it wasn’t geth. It wasn’t something we’d seen before.”

“I understand it was a difficult situation.”

“Don’t do that.” He was exasperated.

Jackson was equally out of patience. “Don’t do what?”
“You don’t believe me, just say it.” He widened his gaze to include all of them, in particular Nguyen, who wasn’t grinning anymore. “Don’t insinuate losing the ship broke me and I don’t know what I’m saying, that I was looking for something to blame and made it up out of thin air.”

None of them could meet his eyes. Except, oddly enough, North. She broke the silence. “I believe you.”

“Why?” Marshall asked her, frankly. “Everyone knows the reapers are a load of bullshit Shepard made up to justify killing the Council, not to mention how goddamn long it took her find Saren. She didn’t want to admit she was outclassed.”

“People thought geth were bullshit too,” she shot back. “I still meet people today who think husks are bullshit. I watched them come through the walls!”

Alenko took a breath to manage his own rising temper. He pointed at the device. “Does that look like any kind of tech you’ve ever seen? And if you think for one second Nathaly would tell that kind of lie just to cover her own ass—”

Nguyen groaned. “Not this again.”

Green placed something else on the table. A Collector gun they salvaged. “I don’t know what it is, either. But that—” he pointed to the gun—“And that—” indicating the device—“Look nothing alike whatsoever. I can’t believe the same people made them.”

Marshall shrugged, conceding the point.

Jackson held up her hand, a universal plea for silence. Once she had it, she looked at Alenko. “Would you believe I don’t think you’re crazy? I don’t know what the truth is. But you don’t sound out of your mind, with grief or anything else. I’m just not convinced you understood whatever it is you witnessed, any more than I’m understanding you now.”

He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Anyway, that’s why I took the device. We need to study it properly.”

“Like the medical device you found in the other lab?” Jackson asked dryly.

“I’m still working on that.”

Nguyen shrugged. “If you ask me, they’re both problems for R&D. Not us.”

North nudged her. She’d been a touch clingy since the mission ended, possibly because Nguyen defended her and the others were still varying degrees of annoyed. “They’re part of this whole puzzle, about what’s happening to the colonies. You’re not interested?”

Green wrinkled his nose, all disgust. “I don’t recall bizarre aliens nobody’s ever heard of being our problem either.”

“I fought aliens before,” Jackson said, sitting back, her tone easy. “Batarians, mostly. The occasional turian skirmish or misunderstanding with STG. Never anything like that.”

Nobody answered; they had none to offer. Even geth were familiar by comparison. After a minute Jackson got to her feet and paced in the tiny cabin. She blew out a breath and looked back at Alenko. “Let’s say you’re perfectly sane. Sovereign died. I watched that happen, too, from Zakera ward fighting back geth. The ship was in pieces. How the hell is it still doing anything, much less way out here in the middle of nowhere?”
Alenko also got out of his seat, and ran his hand over his hair. His head ached, as it had off and on since that thing spoke to him. “Nathaly had a vision.”

Marshall’s voice went very flat. “A vision.”

“The Prothean beacon on Eden Prime, and another we found on Virmire, put a… transmission, or a nightmare, into her head. It used to bother her a lot, when she’d sleep. I swear, by the time Saren got to the Citadel she was getting maybe five hours a night.” He shook his head to clear it. “It told her Sovereign was just the first. The reapers are ancient, and their numbers are legion.”

“Then where are they?” Jackson demanded. “Why would any force that overwhelming, intent on doing us harm, avoid taking action?”

“Our working theory was the reapers hole up in dark space between cycles.”

“Cycles?” Green’s brow furrowed. “What in the hell is a cycle?”

He rubbed his face, his arm protesting, fully aware of how it would sound, aloud. But he’d come this far. “Reapers are called reapers because they harvest organic civilizations. When they’re deemed ripe, which seems to be around the time they start really figuring out the relay system. We worked with a Prothean expert who is convinced this is how Prothean civilization died. We think that’s what the Prothean beacons showed Nathaly— a warning about their end.”

“T’Soni,” Jackson said. “Benezia’s daughter. The one interested in the Lazarus project.”

“Yes.” He didn’t elaborate.

Nguyen started to say something dripping with derision. Jackson held up her hand again. “Shut up.” Then, a little more forcefully when Marshall tried to speak, “I said shut up.”

She was very still for several minutes altogether, so long that the squad began to shuffle awkwardly, though nobody made a sound. So long that Alenko seriously wondered if he’d gone too far, and tripped some kind of anger threshold he had no idea existed.

Then she spoke, quiet as anything. “What was Sovereign doing at the Citadel?”

Then he wished he didn’t have the answer, could tell her anything other than the truth. “It was trying to open a portal to dark space. The Citadel is a massive relay. That part I can actually prove, if you’re interested. It’s been a minor curiosity of the station for decades. No one could activate it, and therefore it wasn’t important.”

He expected more laughter and denials, but instead all he saw were dark looks. North was openly afraid. Jackson simply nodded, as if she’d expected to hear something like that, and didn’t look at him. “Alright. Ok. That’s all for now, Alenko.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He knew his cue. He started to gather his medical supplies, and slink off somewhere out of her direct line of sight, away from the others. He figured they’d all rather had too much of each other.

Then Jackson spoke again. “I’ll tell Cook you should hang onto this one, too. I doubt intelligence will take this any more seriously than I have.”
Shepard was in engineering, trying to learn something about propulsion. “So this drive core is three times the size of the SR-1’s.”

“By volume, yes,” said Donnelly, one of her pair of engineering staff. He had reddish-brown hair and a thick Scottish brogue. There was probably a Star Trek joke in there somewhere, but she doubted these kids would recognize Star Trek. Antiquated science fiction media was something of a niche interest.

Shepard crossed her arms. “But the SR-1 core was already twice as large as any other frigate.”

Gabriella Daniels, the other half of her scant engineering staff and the propulsion expert, gestured at the room, indicating the ship. “The SR-2 is much larger than the SR-1. It needs a more powerful mass effect field to maintain top speed in FTL cruise.”

“Not to mention accelerate without the intrasystem engines for longer,” Donnelly added.

That caught Shepard’s attention. “We can stay stealthed for longer?”

Daniels glanced at Donnelly. “Well, we’re still limited by the IES.”

“But we should be able to move longer distances before it overheats,” he finished.

“So we can come out of FTL further back, go silent, and approach a target with less chance of being spotted?” The short operating range of the SR-1 had always limited their approach strategies. They’d popped out of FTL immediately before the attack at Alchera; Shepard suspected that was how they’d been spotted, that brief blip before they sank into low observable mode.

She liked the idea of sneaking up on their enemies from a position of safety, where nobody would be looking.

“Yes,” Daniels said. “But there’s more to her than just the Tantalus core. The fusion plant delivers four times—”

“Doesn’t it bother you that all this work was stolen from the Alliance?” Shepard interrupted. She looked at her crew. “You were both Alliance specialists long before you joined Cerberus.”

They exchanged a look, Donnelly troubled, Daniels triumphant, as if they’d debated whether this would come up. Donnelly straightened and put his hands behind his back. “We came from the Perugia, ma’am. We fought in the Battle of the Citadel. We saw that… that thing.”

“Sovereign.”

“You told the world the truth. That wasn’t any geth ship. The Alliance didn’t waste any time discrediting you as soon as you weren’t around to object—”

Daniels cut in. “What Kenneth means is we fought the geth, defending our colonies during the war. It doesn’t take an engineer to see the difference between geth cruisers and a reaper. But the
Alliance didn’t want the whole galaxy knowing that.”

“To hell with that, ma’am.” Donnelly looked back at Shepard. “You uncovered the existence of the reapers. People have a right to know what we’re up against. No matter if it makes the navy or the Council look caught out with their pants ‘round their knees.”

Daniels sighed. “He came damn close to being court-martialed. But apparently his opinions were so loud even Cerberus heard them.”

“They gave us a chance to defend humanity and fight our enemy.” Donnelly was eager. It reminded her a little of Ash. “You might not be Cerberus’ biggest fan, Commander, but I’m here to give these Collectors a good kick in the daddy-bags. I don’t think I’ll regret it.”

She couldn’t argue with that logic. The worst thing about this mission was her wholehearted agreement with its intent, and how that constantly got in the way of nurturing her abiding contempt for Cerberus as an organization. It was downright infuriating.

She turned her gaze on Daniels, with one raised eyebrow. “And you?”

“Kenneth would be lost without me,” she said flatly. But there was a hint of humor in her glance as she elbowed him. He rolled his eyes and didn’t contest the point.

She let it go. “You were saying about the power generation?”

“Right.” Daniels brought up a schematic on her terminal. “The fusion plant produces four times the power of the old design. That gives us plenty of juice for the ship’s systems, even electrically expensive systems like the AI core, the laser defense, or those new cyclonic barriers you want to install.”

Donnelly muttered something. Daniels elbowed him again. He glared. “What? I’m just saying, if they’d properly engineered the FBA array for the new power load, it wouldn’t take hours to balance every day and I could get some real work done.”

Daniels sighed. “It’s a maintenance issue.”

“I won’t bore you with the tech,” Donnelly said. He held his hands about half a meter apart, as if encircling a cylinder. “There’s an array of attenuators in the primary power system that channel the field bleed through—”

“Kenneth, you’re boring the commander with tech.” Daniels turned back to her. “If we had T6 FBA couplings, the problem would go away. But I’m sure you have higher priorities than saving your engineers a little time.”

“It’s not a little time— ow!” Donnelly rubbed his shin, where Daniels had delivered a switch kick to shut up his complaints.

“I want my ship at her best,” Shepard said. “Next time we’re in a port where you can find these couplings, get what you need and send the bill to Miranda. We should have the operating budget for it.”

EDI interrupted. “Commander, Dr. Chakwas asks to speak with you in the med bay.”

“Of course she does.” She nodded to her engineers. “Keep up the good work. If you need anything else, don’t hesitate to ask.”
In the elevator to Deck 3, EDI kept up the chatter. “You have now surpassed four hundred kilometers on the treadmill. There are more difficult programs available, to better suit your physical capabilities.”

“It’s fine. I just like to run.” She paused, but she hadn’t had a personal conversation in days, and her mouth went on without her. “I used to do laps of the decks on the SR-1, but this ship’s layout isn’t suited to that. The elevator gets in the way.”

“I see.” EDI also paused, as if to ponder that information, but Shepard knew by now it hardly required that much time. The pause was for her human mind. “Exercise provides excellent stress relief. I can offer a selection of resources to augment this goal. Studies suggest asari herbal teas reduce blood pressure and enhance immune system response. I have also located an excellent acupuncturist aboard Omega—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Shepard was mortified.

“I only wish to ensure my crew is functioning at their best. I lack full access to Normandy’s systems. Without my crew, my hardware is imperiled.”

She replied with heavy sarcasm. “I wouldn’t expect an AI to have any altruistic interest in the crew.”

“You misunderstand me, Shepard. I meant to say— we are all parts of the ship. It is my priority to ensure every component is well-maintained. Otherwise it is uncomfortable.”

The ship was the closest thing EDI had to a body. Shepard hadn’t considered it like that before. “So a malfunctioning component is like walking around on a sprained ankle.”

“I do not experience pain. But your analogy may be apt, within the conceptual framework of organics.”

“Lucky you.”

The elevator opened. EDI said, “I appreciate allowing the engineers to purchase new FBA couplings. I encouraged Engineer Daniels to make the request, but she is slightly intimidated in your presence.”

“I thought the power systems are Engineer Donnelly’s responsibility.” Shepard ignored the rest of it. What would an AI know about reading human emotions?

“Yes, but Engineer Daniels has stronger communication skills. We judged the request had a higher likelihood of success from her.”

“I listen to all my crew. I’m not fussed about the manner of delivery.” But it made her wonder about the impression she was making. It had been a rough few weeks. Maybe it was showing more than she thought.

“I will remember it in the future, Shepard.”

She shook her head, and went into the med bay.

Her bizarre exchange with EDI had successfully distracted her from the awkward tension between her and Chakwas since her outburst. They’d seen each other in passing since, and neither of them had mentioned it. Nor did Chakwas do so now. She turned in her chair, and offered an easy smile. “Commander. It’s good to see you.”
“EDI said you needed me?”

“Please, take a seat.” Chakwas gestured across from her, at the large desk’s only other chair.

Shepard sat, a bit gingerly. Just being in the med bay put her on edge. She could see the operating robot out of the corner of her eye, smaller than the one that hung over her bed on Lazarus station, but just as ominous. She found she didn’t want it completely out of her sight. How ridiculous was that?

Chakwas folded her hands in her lap. “I hoped we might resume our weekly briefings to discuss the health of the crew. You were always particularly responsive to my observations, compared to many C.O.s I’ve worked with in the past.”

“We all want the crew at their best.” Shepard realized that was almost word-for-word what EDI had said, and experienced a moment of chagrin. EDI, however, held its silence.

“Quite.” Chakwas sat back. “You’ll be happy to know Mr. Taylor’s burns are healing nicely. They shouldn’t leave a scar.”

“What about the rest of the crew?”

“Joker’s still balking at his medication, but only a little.” She radiated satisfaction. It was well-known that Joker would seize any opportunity to skip his therapeutic treatments for management of his congenital brittle bone disease. “As a whole, the crew is exhibiting more symptoms of elevated stress levels than I would expect so early in our mission, but I suppose it’s not surprising.”

“They all have a huge personal stake in this.”

“Indeed. I recommend a generous distribution of comm access and rest time.”

“If Cerberus has bandwidth limitations on personal communications, they haven’t told me yet.” In the navy, every person deployed to a ship got a set number of comm minutes a month for personal use. As a result, they mostly relied on emails and vid messages.

EDI answered the unspoken question. “Unlike the Alliance navy, Cerberus utilizes public comm networks along with proprietary encryption protocols. This ensures our only limitation is the capacity of our antenna.”

“No one’s going to be sending home in a combat situation, anyway.”

“Precisely. I second Dr. Chakwas’ suggestion.”

“And Cerberus foots that bill?” Reliance on navy comm networks wasn’t the only reason for limiting comm time. Ship-to-residence transmissions were insanely expensive.

“Cerberus maintains a small number of vessels compared to the Alliance. Its funding streams are adequate to cover the demand.”

She supposed that was true enough. “Thanks, EDI.”

It just slipped out. Thanking a piece of computer equipment felt unnatural. But EDI took it in stride. “You are welcome, Shepard.”

Chakwas glanced at the ceiling. “EDI, could you give us a moment?”

Shepard blinked. “You can do that?”
EDI remained placid. “I cannot disable my recording functions. However, I do have discretion over what I enter into my logs before they are transmitted to Cronos Station. I am programmed to respect certain sensitivities of human behavior.”

“Like what?”

“Like private medical information.” Chakwas sighed. “EDI, if you please?”

“Yes, doctor.” EDI fell silent.

Chakwas looked back at Shepard. “I hoped we could speak about your condition.”

She crossed her arms defensively. “I don’t see what there is to discuss. You have my records from Miranda.”

“Those records are scarcely complete.” Chakwas was all patience. “But I’m also concerned that it’s been a few weeks, and you’ve made no attempt to contact any friends or family. Restoring those personal connections would help you come to terms with the past two years.”

Shepard’s mouth fixed into a stubborn line.

Chakwas leaned forward, speaking gently, though she made no attempt to offer a comforting touch. “I can’t begin to imagine how difficult this is for you. But ignoring your situation won’t make it any easier.”

When she didn’t reply, Chakwas took on a more conversational tone, shifting into story mode. “I mentioned that after the disaster, I was posted to the Alliance Naval Hospital at Hellas Base, on Mars.”

“I went to high school there,” Shepard said.

“So I learned. Your hometown is exceedingly proud of you.”

She shook her head. “It’s not my hometown. Just a place I used to live.”

“Well, in any case, it became public knowledge that I served with you aboard the Normandy. I didn’t encourage it, but I often had patients and colleagues approach me to offer their thanks or condolences. Sometimes with more curiosity than tact.”

Shepard chuckled despite herself. Navy towns had an insularity to them, and the people who lived there were as nosy as any small town folk. She’d been on the rough end of that, more than once, long before she had any galactic notoriety.

“So you can imagine how jaded I was when a walk-in patient asked me if I’d known you well.” Chakwas sat back again, folding her hands in her lap. “He was an older gentleman, presenting with persistent pulmonary disease and arthralgia resulting from an injury incurred some fifteen years prior.”

Shepard went very still. Chakwas continued as if this were just any other story. “His regular physician was on holiday, and he recognized my name when I introduced myself.”

“My father came to your clinic,” Shepard said, her voice absolutely flat.

“I saw his name was Paul Shepard when I reviewed his chart, but I didn’t make the connection until we were in the exam room. But he knew me immediately. Your father has a very sharp
“You have no idea.” That came out with the fervency of a child who had rarely managed to get much past him.

Chakwas chuckled. “I’m sure that’s true. I conveyed my sympathies. I didn’t want to pretend at empathy, not to a grieving parent, but— Well. We all missed you tremendously, I hope you know that.”

Guilt rose into her cheeks in a rush of hot blood, invisible on her dusky skin. Nobody should have to experience firsthand the pain their death inflicted on other people. Cerberus had hired Joker and Chakwas to gain her trust, but instead, they were reminders of failure. This entire ship was a reminder of the person she should have been, an ideal she hadn’t lived up to, and the crew of the SR-1 and everyone who cared for them had paid the price.

It crossed her mind to wonder if this wasn’t some final bizarre hallucination as the last of the oxygen left her brain, out over Alchera. How much crazier would that be, exactly, than a reality where her worst enemy labored for two years to bring her back from the dead?

The doctor continued, oblivious. “He surprised me when he wanted to talk. He said he rarely got to share you with anyone who’d actually worked with you.” Chakwas shrugged. “So that was how it went. He came back several more times. I would examine his joints and listen to his lungs, while he told me stories. All good things, I promise.”

“I don’t need to hear this.” Shepard got up and stalked away from her, staring into the depths of a cabinet without any interest in the contents. “You’re just proving my point. What am I supposed to say to him, after putting him through that?”

“I’m not trying to guilt you,” Chakwas said. “But I don’t believe for one second your father would care what you say. Much less blame you for any of this.”

She knew EDI was still listening, but at the moment, she couldn’t give a damn. “Anyone I care about automatically gets a big orange target on their back. Let’s say I call my dad, and we have a nice reunion. What happens the next time I disagree with the Illusive Man? Once he knows the contents of every conversation I have with everyone I love?”

“Then talk to Kaidan, at least.” Chakwas was completely unruffled. “He can take care of himself.”

Shepard floundered. Chakwas wore a wry smile. “You think I disapproved? My concern is the well-being of the crew, not upholding naval regulations. Every one of your health indicators improved with your relationship.”

She was at a total loss for a reply. She’d known she felt better in his company, in a general sense, but hadn’t realized there was data available. “I… He won’t want to talk to me.”

Her voice was very certain. Chakwas held a hint of bemusement at her denial. “I will admit, I haven’t kept up my correspondence with Kaidan as much I’d like, but I very much doubt that is true.”

Shepard gave a small, non-committal shrug. It was the most she could manage.

“Think about it, anyway.” Her stare was critical. “It’s a hard thing to admit, how little control we have over our own lives. We don’t get a say in what becomes of us after we die.”
“Actually, we do. People leave guidance all the time.” Her voice was tight. She made her own wishes clear, but Cerberus simply hadn’t cared.

“Such things matter much less than you believe. Take it from someone who has seen the clinical aftermath of death many times.” Chakwas continued on, philosophical. “We have no say over our bodies, or our work. Our legacies are constructed by other people for their own ends. Yours moreso than most, given your interesting life.”

“Everyone forgot about the reapers.” Shepard didn’t realize until that moment how much that bothered her. “What the hell did any of us suffer for— what did Ash die for— if the navy just swept it under the rug?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Joker. And the engineering staff. And reading between the lines, trying to catch up on news from the past two years.”

Chakwas raised one elegant eyebrow, and suddenly Shepard was reminded very strongly of her mother. “I’d say not everyone has forgotten, then. You’ve been given an unprecedented opportunity to correct the record on all accounts. Don’t squander it with anger and regret.”

Shepard swallowed. Chakwas pinned in her place with her gaze for several beats, and then let go. She rose and went to her medicine cabinet, rummaged a bit, and withdrew a dosage in a small paper cup. “And you should take these daily.”

Shepard looked down into the cup. “What is it?”

“Immune therapy. To help your body adjust to all your alterations. It should help everything feel a little… less.”

She blinked. “How did you know?”

“You might be the first documented successful case of what the medical profession calls extreme resuscitation. But you’re hardly the first patient with cybernetic implants, artificial organs, or carbon skeletal grafts.” Chakwas folded her arms. “The side-effects are well-documented. I suspect Miranda would have you on them already, if you didn’t harbor such antagonism towards each other.”

The treatment was two capsules, not particularly large. Shepard tossed them back and crumpled the empty cup.

“Same time next week?” Chakwas asked, lightly.

“Sure thing.” Shepard left the med bay disconcerted.

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Later in the afternoon, sick of reports, Shepard went to visit their latest recruit in the Normandy’s lab. The SR-1 hadn’t been large enough to boast a full scientific facility, nor had they need of one. Liara made do in the small space tucked behind the med bay. Aboard this ship, that location was the AI core room. The main lab ran alongside the comm room and was as well-equipped as the rest of the SR-2.

Mordin Solus had settled in directly. He brought little luggage with him, just a footlocker or two of specialized gear from his clinic. But he’d rearranged half the layout in the first few days. He
was removing a bulkhead as she came through the hatch. “Ah! Commander Shepard!”

“You’re taking apart my ship?” she asked, mildly.

He looked at the bulkhead panel in his hands as if surprised to see it. “This? No. Modifications to Cerberus oversight. Disabling cameras, squashing bugs. Don’t like to be spied on.”

“You found EDI’s sensors in this room.”

EDI spoke up. “Not all of them. Only those that feed directly into my logs.”

Mordin concurred. “Prudent to leave communication lines open. AI useful. Could help with research. Collector swarms not simple to evaluate.”

“I advised Dr. Solus that tampering with my monitors is in strict violation of Cerberus protocols.”

Shepard looked at him. “What would it take to convince you to sweep my cabin?”

“No trouble at all. Happy to help.” He set the bulkhead aside. “Meaning to speak with you anyway. Need insight into Cerberus analytical techniques. You are useful evidence. Fascinated by claims. True you were months dead before Cerberus treatment began?”

Her stomach soured. “I don’t like to talk about it.”


“I don’t even know what that means.” Shepard was disconcerted. “Are all salarians like this?”

“Not much experience with salarians?”

“I worked with an STG platoon to take out Saren’s lab. That’s about the whole of it.”

“Did some work with STG. Very secretive. More intense than medicine, directors not interested in the science. Worked with a Captain Kirrahe. Reminds me of you.”

Her expression softened into something like surprise. “You knew Captain Kirrahe?”

“Indeed. Always liked his speeches.” Mordin went to mock-attention. “Hold the line! Very stern.”

The hatch opened, admitting Miranda to the lab. Her presence didn’t dampen Shepard’s delight. She leaned against the bench, resting on her elbows. “He came up with that crazy plan on Virmire, to rig his ship’s drive core as a nuclear explosive. So he couldn’t have been that stern.”

“Creative. Relentless.” Solus tilted his head back and forth, ambivalent. “Bit of a cloaca but good in a fight.”

Shepard actually laughed, a real laugh, coming up from her belly. It felt good. “All marines are.”

“If I might have a moment,” Miranda interrupted, stepping forward.

“Ah! Dr. Lawson!” Solus spread his arms invitingly. “Just the person we needed. Shepard’s physiological function lies outside normal parameters. Expert advice useful.”

Shepard’s face snapped shut like a book. Miranda looked similarly uncomfortable, glancing
between them. From her dossier, it sounded like prior to the Lazarus project, she hadn’t blown the dust of her doctorate for the better part of ten years. “What’s the problem?”

“No problem,” Shepard said, quickly. A little too quickly.

Mordin carried on as though he hadn’t heard. “Had extensive discussion with Dr. Chakwas. Shepard’s medical condition uncertain. Thought you might comment.”

“I wouldn’t presume,” said Miranda, with unusual delicacy.

Mordin seemed to finally pick up on the tension between them. He glanced from one woman to the other. “My mistake. Assumed similarity of experience would provoke bond. Common social behavior in mammals.”

Shepard’s brow furrowed. “Similarity of experience?”

“You were rebuilt by science.” Mordin gestured to Miranda. “Dr. Lawson designed by science. Both unnatural to a degree. Both in excess of species norms.”

She looked at Miranda. “What’s he talking about?”

Miranda didn’t seem discomfited, exactly. More like wary. But she drew that same bright confidence over herself, her favorite cloak. “I’ve had extensive genetic modification. My father is an influential man, and fastidious about maintaining detailed control over every aspect of his personal and professional life. That extended to his daughter.”

Genmods were commonplace, but subject to significant legal limitations. From Miranda’s tone, Shepard guessed her father hadn’t felt obliged to adhere to the law. “Your mother just went along with this?”

She shook her head. “No mother. My base genetic material comes entirely from my father. He designed everything from my looks to my intellect. And he didn’t stop at the cosmetics. I heal quickly, and I’ll probably live half again as long as most humans.”

“That explains a lot,” Shepard said, before she could think better of it.

A hint of bitterness flickered over her face. “Consider it an advantage to our mission. I’m good at just about anything I care to practice, and I’ve put excessive practice into both my combat skills and my biotics. And I learn quickly.”

“I only meant…” Shepard searched for the right words, surprised to feel embarrassed. She might not like Miranda, but she also responded exactly as Miranda expected, and probably just like everyone else, judging her for something she couldn’t help. “You have this… perfection about you. Like nobody else could possibly live up to your expectations and you’re better off doing everything yourself.”

“I’m not perfect.” The bitterness was totally undisguised now. “I didn’t see through Wilson’s deception.”

Shepard reached for a bit of normalcy. “What did you need?”

“Right.” Miranda switched topics just as briskly. “I wanted to speak with both of you. A krogan warlord named Okeer reached out to us. He heard about the Collector plague and wants to do business.”
“Where?” Shepard asked.

“He’s in the Eagle Nebula, at a Blue Suns training camp.”

“That’s what, one relay from here?” They were still near Omega. Shepard didn’t see a reason to waste fuel until they had a solid plan, and that plan required processing ten years’ worth of data on the Collectors, and two-plus years of pre-planning from Cerberus. It was taking some time.

“It’s a long jump, but yes, just one relay. The Imir System, so we won’t have to travel intersystem.” Miranda hesitated. “You can’t avoid the relays forever.”

“What?” Shepard was genuinely surprised. “I’m not avoiding the relay system. I’m trying to formulate a plan, gather some leads.”

Miranda raised her eyebrows. “You all but curl up on the floor whenever we traverse a relay. And you flinch when Jacob or I make use of our abilities.”

Solus’ eyes widened. He paced a few steps. “Yes, yes— strange energy signatures. Sympathetic fields in cybernetic fibers. Accounts for sensitivity—”

“Mordin?” Shepard spoke with a mouth-puckering acidity. “Be quiet.”

He cocked his head. “Perceptible? Why not? Would require prior susceptibility—”

“Mordin.” A little harsher, more of a warning. The salarian pursed his lips. Shepard turned back to Miranda. “What the hell does a krogan warlord or the Blue Suns want with our mission?”

“Okeer claims he’s had contact with the Collectors. Krogan in the Terminus tend to run with Blood Pack, who likely brokered for the engineered plague given the vorcha involvement. So it’s not impossible.” Miranda clearly hadn’t missed the strange exchange. Probably filed it away for later. “Maybe it’s nothing, but you said you wanted leads.”

Shepard pursed her lips, then blew out a breath. “Ok. It’s a good idea. Let Joker know we have a new destination.”

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The crew went about their tasks with renewed vigor, now that they were leaving. It was all they spoke of at evening mess. From the start, Shepard held one ironclad rule. No matter how awful she felt, or angry, or ready to claw off her own skin to rid herself of this constant sensation of not-quite-right, she ate dinner like a normal person in the mess. She had to be visible to the crew.

Gardner loaded up the kitchen’s suspension drawers while they were docked at Omega. The effort paid off; meals had improved markedly. She could almost forget she was on a ship. Word of her vegetarianism had gotten around, too. Gardner seemed to be making a special effort to add variety to his repertoire, enough that other people were starting to request those recipes. It was a welcome break from eating a peanut butter sandwich and a plate of eggs every meal.

Tonight, his corn chowder was especially gratifying. Shepard never lacked for a healthy appetite, but these days, it seemed no amount of food would fill her. It was like being a teenager all over again. Chakwas would take it as more evidence she spent too much time on the treadmill in the shuttle bay, but her PT regimen was intense before she died and she never ate like this. She’d stuff herself silly and be hungry again after only a few hours.

It was actually the vague thought of popcorn that sent her back to Deck 3 later that evening. The
portside observation lounge had an entertainment console, comfy couches, and a bar. Not the sort of thing one found on a navy frigate. Carriers and dreadnoughts were better equipped, though alcohol remained strictly regulated.

Kasumi, Kelly, and their life support specialist, Solaine Forest, sat at the counter pouring over the programming options, wine glasses close at hand. All three women stiffened as she came through the hatch.

“I’m not here to bust you,” she said, wearily. “Someone on this ship should have some fun.”

They exchanged self-conscious looks and relaxed. Kasumi was the least perturbed. “Glad to know you don’t always lead by example, Shep.”

She detested nicknames. But she ignored it, and joined them at the bar. “What looks good?”

“They just uploaded all the holos from May and June.” Forest’s excitement seemed unreasonable. Shepard wondered just how many times she’d watched the previous uploads.

Kelly pointed at the datapad screen, which was synced to the entertainment console. “*Dark Goddess* got good reviews.”

Kasumi wrinkled her nose. “I thought we were trying to escape misery, not enhance it.”

“My cousin loved *Check and Mate*,” Forest offered. They bent over the screen to read the synopsis.

Shepard intended to grab her snack and leave, but Chakwas’ words still lingered in her mind. As did EDI’s concern, of all things. If the AI was worried, things must be pretty bad. It wasn’t like watching a movie with the crew would kill her. Nor would getting out of her own head for a few hours. So instead, she peered over them at the listings.

Every item was a total mystery. Two years out of the world was long enough that she hadn’t been conscious when any of these films went into production. Even the serials were mostly unknown, not that her tastes had ever run to modern entertainment. “Do they have *Stormstruck*?”

Kelly gave her a blank look. “Is that new?”

Forest flipped her hair over her shoulder and made an exasperated sound. “Seriously? First vid series filmed entirely on location in the Martian wilderness. The premise centered on xeno-parasites stirred up by a multi-year dust storm that kept a frontier outpost in isolation, slowly converting the population to zombies.”

The recitation was practically encyclopedic. Kasumi gave her a sidelong look. “You really like your holos.”

Shepard leaned on the bar, resting her chin in her hands. “I finished the third season just before the Battle of the Citadel and never got a chance to come back to it.”

Forest was thrilled to find a fellow enthusiast. “I didn’t know you had a taste for the classics.”

“I don’t really like anything made after ‘48.”

“Really?” Kasumi said it like she claimed to only eat raw unseasoned broccoli.

Forest queried the datapad. “We don’t have it. Not yet, anyway. But I think *Akuze* came out in
May, didn’t it?”

Her blood dropped three degrees. “What?”

Kelly glanced at her, immediately concerned. “It’s a horror movie. Pure fiction.”

“Yeah, but Shepard’s in it, right?” Forest sighed. “I’d love for someone to make a movie about my life. Here it is.”

They all gazed down at the download blurb. Shepard stared at the picture. “What the hell? Which one is supposed to be me?”

Forest tapped a figure, which brought up a better photo as well as a bio. “Her. Cathryn Clane. She’s not terribly known yet but next year she’s going to explode—”

Shepard’s jaw dropped. “Oh my god. She’s whiter than milk.”

Forest looked blank. “Is that bad?”

Kasumi and Shepard fixed her with identical withering stares. Kelly looked embarrassed. Forest shifted in her seat and looked away. Shepard read more of the bio, unable to stop herself. “She’s only 167 centimeters!?”

“Looks hardly able to carry that gear, doesn’t she,” Kasumi added. “Celeb Couture Weekly reported she had to bulk up for filming. Hated every squat of it, apparently.”

Kelly’s eyebrows climbed into her hair. “You read—”

“What?” Kasumi shrugged. “I like pop culture. And sometimes they drop juicy tidbits that can be very helpful for re-distributing their belongings.”

Shepard flipped back to the plot blurb and shook her head, disgusted almost beyond words. “Apparently I’m in a love triangle?”

“Yeah.” Forest evidently couldn’t read people at all. “Colonists keep getting taken in the night, right? So the Alliance sends soldiers—”

“The whole colony was gone before we got there!”

—and you fall for the colony scientist, who is starting to figure out what’s happening, though of course your C.O. won’t listen. Only problem is you left a fiancé back on Arcturus—”

“Parliament couldn’t have dragged Todd’s ass to Arcturus.” She was flabbergasted, with the beginnings of real anger. “And I never cheated on him.”

Kasumi blinked. “Wait, you really were engaged?”

She turned her back on the datapad and crossed her arms. “This is a travesty.”

“What about this salarian comedy?” Kelly asked, changing the subject. “Pure mad science. No controversy.”

The other two assented. They settled on the couch as it loaded up, chatting as Shepard continued to stew. As the opening credits hit the screen, she said aloud, “I should sue them.”

Kasumi rolled her eyes. “Maybe, but you won’t.”
“They implied I ruined my engagement with infidelity when it was his complete inability to cope with—”

“You’re not an idiot.” The corner of her lips turned up. “It’s a mediocre film everyone forgot two weeks after it released. You want to send it to the top?”

“I want these jackasses to never be able to make another film again.”

“Handle it like an adult.” She shrugged, and handed her the bag of popcorn. “I’d break in and replace their footage with cat vids until I broke their spirit, but you might be more of a burn down their studio and slash their tires sort of person.”

Kelly clamped her hand over her mouth. Even Forest couldn’t hold a giggle back. Shepard shook her head, but a small smile tugged at her mouth. Nothing about her life had been anything short of absurd for too long not to see the humor. So instead, she hunched down, shut up, and ate the popcorn.

The movie was not very good. But having one evening where she almost felt human again was worth ninety-eight minutes of shit dialogue, any day.

In fact, she was in such good spirits by the time the movie ended, that as she got ready for bed, she thought about what Chakwas had said and sat down at her terminal. She’d been awake two weeks. Surely the doctor was right, and that was long enough to try reaching out.

Navy email addresses were easy unless a person had a terribly common name, and Kaidan didn’t. She filled in the proper field. And then sat, watching the cursor blink in the message body, for five entire minutes.

Then she shook her head, straightened in her chair, and typed: *Dear Kaidan,*

Stared at it another thirty seconds, and backspaced over it.

This was stupid. Shepard wanted to talk to him, so much it ached, ever since she woke up. Before Kaidan was anything else to her, he’d been her best friend, and she really needed that right now, to talk with someone who got her, on this ship where nobody seemed to understand her at all. But her fingers couldn’t type while her brain kept replaying their last conversation. Standing in the battery, surrounded by smoke and fire, screaming at him to get to the goddamn evac shuttles. His voice shaky as he accepted the order. She watched him disappear into the haze and the flames. Spinning slowing in the dark as the last of her air left the suit, realizing that this time, she wasn’t coming back to him.

“I’m sorry,” she tried again. But her breath started coming faster, words accelerating out of her throat, utterly unstoppable. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m—”
Her terminal followed her faithfully. *I'm sorry I'm sorryI'm sorryI'm sorry*

The cursor blinked. Waiting, expectant.

Shepard slammed the terminal shut. Then she hauled the comforter and pillow off the bed, and scrunched up on the couch, away from the intolerable skylight. Because Chakwas didn’t know that Kaidan came to get her off the ship, and she said no. That they both knew damn well that she couldn’t leave people behind and she made him go away.

There was no apology big enough in the world to make up for that.

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick note for anyone who might be interested: I've wanted to start a ME fandom blog for about a year, and finally did so. You can find it at [https://pigeonthecoeandonly.tumblr.com/](https://pigeonthecoeandonly.tumblr.com/). I'll be posting drabbles as well as various things from the screenshot collection.
Shepard found Miranda in her office, preparing for their arrival at Korlus a few hours hence. She looked up with her usual polite smile as she came through the hatch. “Hello, Shepard.”

“Good morning.” Shepard settled into one of the chairs across from her desk. “You assembled a brief on this training camp we’re about to visit?”

“I have.” Miranda pulled up the report on her terminal. “It’s clear after Omega that mercenary politics are going to play a critical role in our activities. I didn’t understand what was going on between the Suns and Blood Pack, and I don’t think you did either.”

She shook her head, once. “The Terminus was never my specialty, even when I had current intel.”

“Our contact, Okeer, is here on contract to the Blue Suns.”

Whatever her other feelings towards her X.O., Shepard had to admit she was immensely competent. She’d assembled the report in only a few hours. “Why the Suns? I thought krogan were associated with the Blood Pack.”

“He’s been cagey in his communications. And this is the mercenary equivalent of boot camp. Not exactly a prime hunting ground for Collectors eager to gather up human DNA.” Miranda sat back. “But just being there will provide intel on the Suns. And we’ve had another opportunity arise as well.”

“On Korlus?” Shepard didn’t hide her skepticism. “Isn’t that place a landfill for spaceships? Full of scrap?”

“What better place to create a complex training ground?” Miranda shrugged. “Cheap to configure, out of the way, and too impoverished for anyone to care about a few stray bullets.”

“I suppose. It’s high-gravity and hotter than hell, though.” Shepard sighed. “We better requisition a whole pallet of deodorant.”

Miranda’s eyes cut to her. That sounded almost like a joke. Shepard’s attention remained fixed on the terminal display. “This looks like another Cerberus dossier on a potential recruit.”

“Zaeed Massani,” Miranda confirmed. “He has extensive experience throughout the Terminus. I expected to meet him on Omega, but he never showed.”

She leaned forward to get a better look at the screen. “He’s connected to the Blue Suns, right?”

“Possibly. We’re not certain of the nature of his affiliation.” She tapped on the keyboard. “He’s a gun for hire. Most recently, he took a bounty on a batarian target. We think he’s rabbited here. Massani had boots on the ground in Choquo five hours ago.”

Shepard couldn’t think of a worse place to run. “Why?”

“Maybe the target thought if he enlisted, the Suns would protect him. Or maybe he had other connections here.” Miranda shrugged.

She parsed the information, her eyebrows raised. “Says his last job before this was
commandeering and scuttling a turian frigate? Where do you find these people?”

“I didn’t find them.” She folded her arms on the desk, with a small grimace of frustration. “That was someone else’s assignment, under the Illusive Man’s personal attention. He got a list of names and passed them to a… researcher in my project, to flesh out their dossiers and recommend them for the team. About a half dozen made the cut.”

“A researcher.” She hadn’t missed the pause.

“It shouldn’t surprise you that preparation for this mission required a large number of staff.”

“These dossiers are very thorough.” It troubled her. Cerberus had no respect for privacy whatsoever.

“Would you prefer vague? You’ve said many times you like to know the people you work with.”

“This is different from knowing somebody. A dossier is just an assemblage of information.” Shepard hated this new prevarication in herself, hated the way her tongue kept catching on her scrambled thoughts. Like she couldn’t drum up any confidence for anything, not even a basic conversation. “How much do you know about me?”

Miranda was candid. “Would it bother you if I said nearly everything? Our researcher was very good at her job.”

“You don’t know everything.” That, at least, was absolutely certain.

“You became a vegetarian in 2182.” Miranda pulled out this piece of trivia with a spark of amusement. “This persistent paranoia is absurd. The Lazarus Project had no nefarious agenda.”

“Sure,” Shepard said, her voice peculiarly heavy. “But you can’t tell me why I’m vegetarian.”

Miranda glanced up. Shepard knew her eyes gave away nothing. She continued in the same hard, even tone. “That’s the difference between memorizing a fact and knowing something.”

“Your dossier wasn’t generated out of malice. We wanted to give you the best chance we could at recovering from your accident.”

“I want to see a copy of it.”

“I don’t have a complete version on our local server, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Just like my medical records from the Lazarus Project. Convenient.”

“Yes. It was a massive conspiracy to store all your records close to the project which urgently required them.”

Shepard watched her for several moments. No doubt Miranda was an excellent liar. She wished she believed she was lying now. Her faith in the Illusive Man blinded her to the things he might want to hide. From her, or from Shepard.

Shepard switched topics. “Tell Joker to approach Korlus with the IES hot. I don’t know what we’re going to step in after that mess with the Suns defending the plague ward, and I don’t want to arrive with our pants down.”

“Good idea. I’ll see to it.”
Several hours later, Shepard stood on the bridge, watching the Normandy approach Korlus. Out the port, the planet was an angry brown ball wrapped in stringy clouds.

“Orbital insertion complete. Two hours of stealth movement remain before the drive core must be discharged.” EDI announced, her blue orb pulsating. “Be advised that other ships in orbit above Korlus will be unable to detect us with enough warning to avoid a collision.”

“Noted.” Joker punched off a proximity warning light in irritation. Shepard raised an eyebrow. He sighed. “This planet’s one big garbage heap. There’s so much debris floating around it’ll be a miracle if we don’t chip something.”

Like most modern spacecraft, the Normandy could absorb minor hazards, like small impacts from scrap. But if Joker was annoyed enough to mention it, the risks could be worse than usual. “After we head down, you should retreat to a lagrangian point. Stay hidden out of the way and conserve power.”

“And if things go south?”

“You won’t lose much time getting back here.”

EDI chimed in. “Shepard’s logic is sound. The ship requires more time to power its acceleration systems and enter Korlus’ atmosphere than cross the minor distance from the L1 or L2 points.”

“I know that,” Joker snapped. “Still makes my neck twitch.”

Shepard folded her arms. “You’re just annoyed that you don’t get to do a Mako drop.”

“Cerberus wants you to walk everywhere, that’s their problem.” He threw up his hands. “But don’t come crying to me when their half-assed shuttle pilot falls asleep at the LZ and leaves you to extract yourself.”

So that was the real problem. Shepard hid a grin. “Nobody’s stopping you from commanding the shuttle.”

“And leave Normandy to that thing?” He pointed at EDI, who pulsed again, unperturbed. “She’d have the co-pilot eating out of her hand in no time.”

“I do not have hands, Mr. Moreau.”

“OSD slot. Whatever.” Joker shot her an accusing glare. “Don’t think I didn’t hear Oyama fawning over you yesterday.”

“Ms. Oyama removed dirt from my camera lenses.” EDI’s inflection, if she could be said to have any, took on a hint of amusement. “Full communication function has been restored to the bridge.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got plenty of grease left.”

“Joker.” Shepard was losing patience. “Play nice with the fancy computer. Haven’t two hundred years of vids taught you anything?”

EDI’s constellation of lights brightened slightly. “Shackling subroutines in my programming prevent such undesired outcomes.”

Shepard stared at her, hard, for a long moment. That almost sounded like sarcasm, but EDI had no
sense of humor whatsoever. Or personal desires, as far she could tell, at least beyond a well-maintained ship.

The intercom activated. Jacob. “Shepard, we’re set for departure.”

She glanced up at the ceiling. “Be right there.”

“Don’t forget to bring back tribute for the future overlord,” Joker called after her. “Like a rusty antiproton accelerator, or maybe some rat-chewed wires.”

Shepard shook her head and kept walking.

Down on the hangar deck, Miranda and Jacob were already aboard. The shuttle’s untouched white paint stood not only as a reminder of Cerberus, but also that this ship, this crew, remained largely untested. The fresh-off-the-line feeling left Shepard wanting for a sense of continuity. The original Normandy crew all trained together before setting out, and the SR-1 took her share of battering and then some in her six months of service.

These days that loneliness never quite left her, thought she got more proficient at squashing it. Now, she raised her suited hand and scraped one of the knuckle plates across the paint near the hatch. White gave way to a thin, ragged streak of blue. “This is a Kodiak. Alliance surplus.”

“No need to reinvent the wheel,” Miranda said, crossing her legs. It was the first positive comment Shepard heard her make about the Systems Alliance.

Still, she was conflicted. A veneer of paint and some new cushions wouldn’t change what the shuttle was, a piece of an older life hiding aboard her new, unwanted ship, yet somehow the difference meant the entire world. “They’re not supposed to sell to you.”

Jacob snorted. “I doubt Cerberus bought it direct.”

Shepard lacked the appetite for another pointless argument about propriety. Jacob might have served, but it was obvious he never understood what service meant, if he couldn’t tell the difference between that and this. She ducked her head and climbed aboard. “Do we have a lock on Okeer or Massani?”

“I spoke with our agents down on the surface.” Miranda sat back as the hatch slid shut, folding her hands over her knee, perfunctorily professional as always. “They tracked Massani to the training camp. We should be able to pick up them both. Less fortunately, the Suns haven’t responded to our visitation request.”

Shepard, for her part, continued to gaze around the shuttle interior, picking out the familiar features lurking beneath the Cerberus adulterations. Here, a metal strut was encased in a plastic bulkhead; there, canvas hand-holds were supplanted by long powder-coated tubes.

A certain brittle sweetness entered Miranda’s voice. “Care to join us, Shepard?”

She cleared her throat. That seemed to happen a lot lately, unintentionally drifting somewhere else. It concerned her too deeply to admit out loud. So she reached for completely different topic. “I was born on a first-gen Kodiak. My mother kept putting off medical leave until her C.O. literally ordered her off the ship. She was en route Arcturus when I popped out, right between the emergency pressure release and the med kit. Or at least that’s how she tells it.”

Jacob chuckled, as the pilot lifted the shuttle out of its berth and headed out of the bay. “At least she’s got a sense of humor about it. My mom just complains about how my dad wasn’t there.”
“They split up?”

“They actually didn’t, no.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Though I can’t say anyone cried too hard when he died.”

Miranda stared out the port as the hangar deck bulkhead gave way to the blue-dotted arc of Korlus, studiously avoiding the small talk, though Shepard was damned if she knew what was offensive about it. Maybe just her own lack of a mother.

The blackness of space gave way to the orange plasma of re-entry, though the cabin didn’t so much as tremble despite the violence without. Kodiaks had out-sized drive cores to start with, and this didn’t begin to tax the shuttle’s dampeners. They were held stable in a mass effect field.

In fact it took Shepard a moment to realize when they’d slowed enough to shed the heat. Korlus drowned in a soupy brown haze thick enough to chew. As they lost more altitude, here and there through the smog she glimpsed acres of rusting metal and dots of brilliant turquoise, acid green, and blood red— lakes too polluted to retain their natural color. The heavy backbones of discarded ships stuck up from the refuse like bony fingers clawing at the toxic air. Bulkheads formed crude retaining walls to hold back the refuse.

Shepard wasn’t much for plants, but only a fool would mistake the complete waste on display. “Garden worlds aren’t exactly a dime a dozen.”

“No.” Miranda’s continued to gaze out the port, collected as ever. “Cerberus advocates human expansion into the Terminus in part to prevent this sort of squandering.”

“Yes, well, that’s worked out for you.” Shepard sat back and crossed her arms. “Colonies being taken by the dozens and all.”

Miranda didn’t dignify that with a response.

The Kodiak set down on a relatively flat patch of piled metal and the pilot popped the hatch. A baking heat wafted into the shuttle, dry and carrying the tang of rust. Shepard felt herself sweating before both feet were on the ground, and for the first time, felt a faint spark of appreciation for her drastically shortened hair.

From somewhere up ahead, a woman’s voice barked from tinny loudspeaker. “There is only one measure of success: kill or be killed! Perfection is your goal.”

“Seriously?” Shepard said, to no one in particular.

Jacob was equally disgusted. “Canned orders over a loudspeaker? Who does that?”

“More like platitudes—the cheap kind.” She drew her rifle. “Stay sharp. We don’t know what kind of welcome to expect.”

The Blue Suns had assembled the decaying scrap into a kind of obstacle course, with ladders, twisting alleys, high perches and valleys, concealed and not. Everything a trainer could want for a live fire exercise. Judging from the shots sounding in the distance, that was exactly what was happening.

They followed a ramp down into the complex. A figure clad in the Suns’ trademark blue hardsuit raised his weapon and let off a round. Shepard returned fire, and he fell, dropping his gun in the process.
“Trainees,” she sighed. She hadn’t aimed to kill. They continued down the ramp towards the fallen merc.

A very young man sat against a decaying bulkhead, clutching his side and muttering to himself. The sheen of sweat lathering his forehead was more than the heat. “Shit… shit… it won’t stop bleeding… I’m gonna… damn it.”

Jacob glanced at Shepard, and said in an undertone, “He’s not hurt that bad.”

“He doesn’t need to know that just yet.” She tucked her thumbs into her utility belt and sauntered forward.

The merc glared up at her as she came into range. Blood spattered his headset, like he’d touched it after hauling himself over here. “I knew it wasn’t berserkers. You’re with that other guy. Freelancers. Or—or Alliance. Or—hell with all of you.”

Shepard folded her arms. “You get a lot of Alliance out here?”

Korlus was well inside the Terminus Systems. That only seemed to make him angrier. He couldn’t have been more than seventeen. Maybe even a bit younger. “I’m not telling you anything.”

She had to bite her lip to keep a straight face. She’d barely nicked him, as bullet wounds went, though it evidently spurted some and was quite enthusiastic. Blue Suns must give their recruits absolute shit gear. “I’ve got a nice fresh dose of medi-gel right here. But if you’d rather I keep walking…”

“Fuck.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes, ma’am, I want your help’.” She squatted down in front of him, and draped her arms over her knees. “What other guy?”

“Some random commando. Alone. Wouldn’t identify.” The kid’s breath came heavy, as though he really was mortally wounded. Imagination was a hell of a drug. “He took out a whole patrol by himself.”

“You shoot at everyone who comes through here?”

“Private property. I’m on guard duty,” he grunted. “Look, Suns are the only ones out here. Jedore uses krogan overflow from the labs to train us up. That old krogan bastard’s really cleaning house this week. You’re not Suns, so why shouldn’t we shoot you?”

Miranda’s interest sharpened. “Lab overflow?”

At the same time, Shepard asked, “What krogan? I thought Okeer was the only krogan in the camp.”

He glanced between them and curled his lip. “Jedore hired Okeer to grow her an army, but the krogan he creates are insane, so they’re repurposed for live ammo training by the hundreds.”

Miranda shook her head. “Why?”

“Not a damn clue. They don’t let us in the labs.” He closed his eyes with a long sigh of relief as Shepard packed his injury with the promised medi-gel. “I don’t get paid enough for this crap. Don’t get paid at all yet.”
Shepard rolled her eyes. “If you start limping now, you might find a shady spot before you bleed out.”

He stumbled off, cursing. Jacob turned to her with silent judgment on his face. She was unmoved. “Not much like Alliance basic.”

“No,” he said, letting it go.

They resumed walking. Shepard looked at Miranda. “Is it much like Cerberus boot camp?”

“The paramilitary recruits go through an indoctrination to Cerberus operational procedures, but most of our people come to us already trained in combat. There’s no need to duplicate it.”

Shepard made a sound of satisfaction. “That’s just it, isn’t it.”

Miranda didn’t bother to hide her weariness. “What lecture are you preparing now?”

“No.” Shepard started walking again. “That’s why the ship feels more like an office than a crew. It’s been nagging at me.”

Jacob cleared his throat. “All of the Normandy crew is trained to fight, at least at a rudimentary level. Obviously staff with non-combat roles aren’t as—”

“I’m not bothered by—” She blew out a breath and started over. “You know that’s not the point of basic. I mean, sure, we fold that in, too. But you think we’d spend ages teaching some logistics paper-pusher to shoot a pistol if that was the main objective?”

“Ah, yes. Camaraderie.” Miranda kept her eyes ahead, her tone disdainful. “Everyone who comes to Cerberus already believes in our cause. We’re all fighting for the same objectives.”

Shepard’s hand slashed through the air. “Again, not the point. You can’t run a military operation like some kind of non-profit. In a war, everyone involved has to think only of the good of the group. That’s why we spend three months isolating our recruits and re-engineering their priorities.”

“It does work, Miranda,” Jacob put in. “When you get in a tough spot, you can’t think. You have to defend your team, even if it costs your life. Sometimes that’s the only reason anyone survives.”

“I never said it didn’t work. But I think you’ll find deeply held beliefs can be just as binding.”

Shepard let that stand. Certainly their mission, to defeat the Collectors, checked all of her boxes. Daring, novel, challenging, critical to safeguarding human space. But she had no faith— would never have faith—in the Cerberus cause. The very idea of Cerberus acting as a military protector in the Terminus left a foul taste in her mouth. Her crew, on the other hand, consisted of believers.

In the navy common cause was likewise assumed, and if your opinions ran in a different groove, you kept it to yourself. It occurred to her that this might be why she felt so alienated aboard ship. She hadn’t exactly been silent about her misgivings.

And if she couldn’t get them all on the same page, fighting as a team, when they hit the Collector home world they’d be paste.

“You’ve gone very quiet,” Jacob remarked.

Shepard shook her head to disperse her thoughts and changed the subject. “Just thinking that I’ve
seen this before. Saren bred a small army of krogan clones, on Virmire, before we destroyed his labs. Even had a krogan scientist assisting him. Droyas. A drive core explosion does a lot of damage, but it was a huge complex… there was rubble left in areas.”

Miranda gave an eloquent shrug, uncaring. “It wouldn’t be the first time cast-off tech made its way to merc hands. I don’t see that it matters.”

“We should visit the restricted research base,” Jacob said.

Miranda nodded. “If nothing else, it’s the most likely place to find Okeer.”

“Let’s see how the day goes.” Shepard raised her rifle a bit higher, the quicker to aim, not enough to interfere with her movements. “Some kind of valley up ahead. I saw a flash of blue armor.”

There was indeed a large trench scraped out of the scrap pile. A pair of women carrying rocket launchers ducked out of sight as the squad approached.

“Shit,” Shepard said, just as another announcement came over the loudspeaker.

“Being hired is merely the beginning. You must earn your place in the mighty army we are building.” Jedore, presumably. “Training is part of your contract. Kill our enemies, prove your right to walk among us.”

Jacob ducked sideways as a rocket sailed at his position. “What the hell?”

“You heard the lady.” Shepard moved up and crouched against what looked like a discarded freezer from some long-lost ship’s mess. “She wants a fight, I’m happy to oblige.”

More than, actually. As one of the Suns darted out of cover to fire her rocket, Shepard nailed her knee. She collapsed. Shepard felt a curl of satisfaction; these days, combat was the only time anything felt right.

A second later Shepard’s forehead contracted painfully, and Miranda’s biotics lifted the merc three meters into the air and slammed her face-first into the trench.

Shepard shot at the second rocketeer and managed a minor hit. The merc scrambled out of sight. She moved up and climbed onto a broken duct in hopes of getting a sight line.

The woman leaned out of cover already firing. Shepard managed to drop her, but the rocket was already in the air, and even her reflexes weren’t fast enough to kill the merc and dodge the missile. It exploded against the ducting.

Her shields went down with a familiar pop and she pitched forward into the trench as the ducting collapsed. Shepard tumbled for ten meters, with no purchase to redirect her fall, and landed hard on her side. Despite relaxing her limbs to reduce impact, she was surprised when her arm didn’t snap; she’d broken bones in falls before.

The mercs gave her no time to contemplate it. She had to scramble on hands and knees as the rocketeers’ ground support peppered her location with his shotgun.

The rifle was somehow still in her grip. Shepard dragged herself behind a pile of rust, spent a half second listening to him fire another shot to pinpoint his location, spun around, and landed three shots in his chest. The first two destroyed his shields. The third cracked his ceramic plating, the last line of defense, and made him stumble. From above, one of her squad finished him off. Then there was silence.
Shepard sat back behind her cover and pressed her comm. “Report.”

“Hostiles neutralized.” Jacob had that familiar tone again, the one that sounded more like an Alliance marine than anyone Cerberus, that he only used when he was nervous. “Area clear.”

Miranda seemed equally uncertain. “We should keep moving. We’re out in the open here.”

“Agreed.” Shepard studied the far end of the trench. “Get down here. There’s a path into the compound.”

“Copy that,” Jacob said.

While she waited, Shepard crossed the trench towards the fallen merc. He wore a headset. A stream of barely-audible babble came through the speaker. Shepard bent, slipped it off his head, and secured it over her ears. The Alliance imbedded comms in all of their personnel, hard to interrupt and impossible for an enemy to casually overhear their communications, but at considerable expense compared to this.

Past the usual static of interference with her own, internal unit, she heard a merc issuing urgent commands. “Team Four, do you read? Team Four!” A pause. “Comm, tell Jedore we have a problem. Patrols are going dark on both ends of the base. One guy can’t do that. Either the krogan are pushing, or we’re being raided.”

She smiled to herself, adjusted the volume, and went to rejoin her squad.

Jedore wasn’t impressed with her field commander’s request. And she didn’t have the tact to answer it privately, instead resorting to the loudspeaker as before. “The krogan are your example and your warning! As ferocious as they are, failures are expendable.”

“A little out of touch,” Shepard remarked.

Jacob shook his head. “I’ve never thought much of the Suns, but this is depressing, even for them.”

The dead merc’s radio lit up again. “They’re loose! Run for your damn life! The krogan are free!”

After she relayed the intel, she asked, “Think that’s Massani?”

Miranda lifted her hand, palm up. “They’d be as much a danger to him as the mercs.”

Jedore’s voice shouted from a nearby loudspeaker. “Who authorized that krogan release? Okeer? I will have order in my compound!”

Shepard snorted, amused. “I should’ve figured Jedore would have some enemies here.”

“Yeah.” Jacob rubbed his chin. “Maybe that’s why Okeer called us.”

They reached the end of a ramp and rounded a corner. A lone krogan, shrouded head to toe in a grimy hardsuit, faced off against a squad of mercs. Shepard’s mouth thinned into a line. The bright colors of his suit would stand out against the rust of the training base. Unlike the Suns, he had no secondary weapons, no backup, and he wore a tight-fit helmet that she could tell wouldn’t provide much periphery vision.

Just a training exercise. No need to make it too difficult.

She raised her rifle and shattered the bone of the nearest merc’s dominant arm.
He let out a scream and lost his grip on his gun. As he turned, she was able to get her first choice — a clear shot at his head. His corpse swayed on its feet for a long second before toppling over.

Her crew was caught off-guard. They scrambled for cover. Shepard couldn’t be bothered; at that moment, her indignant fury guarded her better than a foot of lead. She caught motion out of the corner of her eye— another merc, this one with a heavy secondary shield glimmering above his armor, levering a massive krogan shotgun in her direction. That strongly implied exoskeleton augmentation in his hardsuit. But it also made him slow.

She was less familiar with these newer guns than she liked, but had learned to identify the location of the thermal clip— and that to aid heat transfer, the chamber was rarely well-protected. Shepard took aim. The bullet went all the way through the gun and pinged off the turian’s armor.

His mandibles flared, exposing a sneer, thinking she’d missed. He fired. It was a heavy-hitter. Her shield went down instantly and her armor plating cracked, somewhere between the layers, with an audible shatter. She could feel the bruise blooming over her ribs. But she didn’t so much as stumble, though she’d expected to lose her footing as soon as she heard that snap. Maybe armor tech had come as far as weaponry over the past two years.

There wasn’t time to think about it. Shepard was in the open, shield recycling, armor damaged, facing three mercs.

A manic grin lit her face. Her blood pounded, hot under her skin, and her feet felt like they were born to stand on this patch of dirt.

Shepard threw herself sideways, rolling out of the way of the next attack, and rising in a crouch to take out a batarian merc at his knees. The krogan chose that moment to barrel into the fight bodily, shouldering the turian out of the way and seizing the fourth merc, a human woman, in both of his massive hands.

Meanwhile, Miranda completed some kind of tech wizardry and the secondary shields vanished, leaving the mercs looking almost naked in comparison. Jacob wasted little time firing off several rounds in rapid succession, and then using his biotics to pull the batarian towards his position. Shepard’s head twinged but she hardly noticed— until Miranda followed it with a ball of raw dark energy, detonating the incompatible fields in a massive explosion.

Shepard went to her knees. Her vision faded out. For a moment her whole world shrank to the eight pounds of brain that now felt like the core of a star, nothing but blinding pressure.

The krogan all but flung the human merc at the wall. She hit the decaying bulkhead like a rag doll, her head bouncing freely off the metal, limbs askew, and slid to the ground.

Shepard swallowed several times and tried to clear her sight, aware her life depended on it, nausea tearing at her gut. The biotic display had been less than a meter away, closer than ever. Every nerve felt poisoned.

The turian raised his shotgun. She looked into the barrel.

Then, as he squeezed the trigger, the gun all but disintegrated in his hands as the misdirected heat melted the chamber and the weight of the weapon tore it apart. He dropped it with a yell, the gloves of his hardsuit smoking. The krogan pivoted in place, clumsy but effective, and fired his weapon. The turian merc crumpled and lay still.

In the aftermath Shepard got to her feet and rubbed her knotted stomach, though it was hard to
soothe through the protective layers of her suit. She looked at the krogan. “Thanks.”

He ambled towards her, not hostile, but didn’t stop until his bent head was centimeters from her chest, and inhaled deep through his nostrils. “You.”

She felt more than saw her squad shift behind her, and raised her hand automatically in a silent order to hold. The krogan sniffed her again. “You don’t smell like this world. You… are new. Seven night cycles and I have felt only the need to kill. Some difference makes me speak.”

His voice was deep and oddly cadenced, as though he was unaccustomed to using it. He backed off several steps. The tiny visual ports of his helmet glowed yellow, inhuman, and not much like krogan either.

“You’ve been fighting for seven days?” she asked.

“No. I was flushed from glass mother seven night cycles past. I was not perfect.” He said this without any inflection whatsoever. “The voice told me to fight. So I fight.”

“You’re supposed to be part of Jedore’s army.” Shepard remembered what the injured merc said about the krogan being crazy, and wondered if that was Jedore, or being bred in a tube, part of a massive experiment.

“I know that name. Anger. Also laughter. It is not a name that will be sung when we march.” He paused. “I don’t know what that means, but I’ve heard it many times.”

Shepard was a little familiar with krogan customs and had some idea of exactly how much of a joke that made Jedore, but that wasn’t the first question on her mind. “How many times could you have heard it in seven days?”

“I heard a voice in the water, a scratching sound. Not with ears. Inside. I called it father. It liked that. The voice taught me what I needed. Walking, talking, hitting. It ordered me to survive, to fight the enemy that threatens all my kind. But it was disappointed. I am not what it needs me to be.”

Miranda folded her arms. “A cure for the genophage.”

It wasn’t a question. But the krogan tilted his head nonetheless. “Cure? Cure was not mentioned. Survive. Resist. Ignore.”

Shepard set aside why the Blue Suns might care about the genophage, figuring she could find her own answers soon enough, and not sure she’d understand the krogan’s reply, anyway. “I need a way to the labs.”

“The glass mother. Yes.” He glanced off. “She is up. Past the broken parts. Come.”

They followed him down a narrow alley. He gripped a thick metal panel over two meters long, straining at the weight of it. With a grunt he cast it aside. In its place was an informal doorway leading further into the base.

She glanced from the opening to the krogan. “You could have run.”

“The voice told me to wait.”

“The voice sent you out here to die.” Shepard couldn’t stop herself. “It threw you out like you were just another piece of ship trash.”
“I am not perfect,” he acknowledged, as though it was solemn truth. “But I have a purpose. I must wait until called. Released. I will not run, and I will not follow.”

Shepard already didn’t like Jedore. But as she stared into his placid, passive face, she made up her mind to kill her. Maybe drown her in a tank. “Thank you. I won’t forget it.”

He didn’t shift at all. “There are more fleshy things ahead.”

She gave him a nod, and gestured her squad through, giving him one last glance before following.

The krogan continued to weigh on her mind as they moved steadily forward, dealing with merc patrols as they found them. This whole business left her feeling dirty. And it struck a little too close to home. \textit{I am not what it needs me to be.}

The increasingly desperate messages over the stolen radio demonstrated Jedore neither empowered her field commanders, nor provided them with resources to repel any real threat. She holed up with her the base’s only supply of mechs while her recruits died like rabbits.

Shepard had trained in a harsh school. The N7 program rivaled any in the galaxy. Putting her life on the line for a mere exercise wasn’t unfamiliar, but at no point had the navy treated her like an expendable target dummy. At no point had she made live fire target practice out of other living beings. She didn’t like killing recruits who weren’t remotely prepared to face a spectre because their commanding officer was too shit scared to give them a fighting chance. She didn’t like killing krogan who were bred as experiments and discarded just as carelessly.

Half her crew—over twenty people—died at Alchera and were likely still there. And she was here. Because Cerberus thought she was special, like she was worth using, and they were used up.

“The path leads inside,” Jacob said, scattering her thoughts. “Looks almost like a CIC.”

She peered through the shadows. A winding ramp led to a series of platforms, the belly of the ship somehow both darker and more open than an Alliance vessel. “It’s a dreadnought CIC. Batarian.”

“Looks intact.” Miranda tried her footing on the ramp. “They’re using it as a staircase. We must be getting close.”

They climbed up the ramp. The slope didn’t present much of a challenge, but between the oppressive heat, the higher gravity, and the barely-viable concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere, their pace was slower than usual. Thus the squad was barely a third of the way to the top when they heard the shotgun blast, followed by the rattle of an assault rifle and a liberal stream of curses. In English.

The man sounded more annoyed than panicked, not at all like the mercs they’d encountered so far. Shepard increased her pace, but saw no reason to sprint up to the platform and arrive in an unknown situation out of breath. Maybe EDI was right, and she should adjust the treadmill settings. The Cerberus coma-PT wasn’t cutting it.

She found him midway up the ramp, crowded behind a dented cargo crate, his battered rifle set firmly over its top. Beside him, a batarian in a Blue Suns hardsuit cowered with his knees drawn up to his chin and his hands over his ears. Up ahead, a pair of krogan advanced steadily on their position, firing in lockstep, more like a pair of mechs than any krogan she’d met.

He barely acknowledged her as she scrambled into cover beside the batarian and took aim. She had to shout to be heard. “Zaeed Massani, I presume?”
“Who wants to know?” he asked, continuing to fire.

Shepard managed to pierce the helmet of the nearest krogan, who stumbled but kept his footing. She’d hit the bony crest, then. She adjusted her sights. “I’m Shepard. You signed a contract with Cerberus but missed your pick-up.”

He barked a laugh. Massani had a thick Londoner accent, and a complete absence of adrenaline. His next shot went into the krogan’s knee. “And you’re the Illusive Man’s enforcement?”

Further back, Miranda and Jacob had found their own cover, and were chewing away at the second krogan. Shepard watched a third step into view at the top of the ramp. “I’m not here for him. He can fuck himself.”

The first krogan finally fell, fewer than four meters from their position. They each shifted to the second. “Nobody visits this shithole for their health.”

“I’m on a mission to stop the Collectors from abducting colonists.” Krogan weighed several tons and had multiple redundant organ systems. No amount of bullets seemed to slow them down. Shepard elected to try her earlier idea, and shot through his heat sink to disable his gun.

Massani hammered away at his armor. “Can’t say I like true believers much. Your kind or Cerberus. But your people can move a lot of credits.”

Figured it would be greed. She bit her tongue, though, because it was hard to pretend her motives for staying with Cerberus, to fill in her lost two years, were any less selfish. There were lots of ways to fight Collectors. Not so much in the Terminus, maybe. And a lot of ways to get paid.

Jacob managed to net the krogan in a biotic field that pulled him away from the ramp, doomed to fall several stories once it failed. Miranda fired steadily. “More coming!”

A fourth and a fifth krogan emerged, and Shepard thought she saw a sixth in the shadows behind them. They needed a new strategy. Her gaze swept the field, taking stock of her options.

The batarian shuddered every time a round struck their barricade. He had no weapons, and an orange omni-tool tracer circling one wrist suggested Massani had found his bounty. His eyes had a wild look. “You have to help me!”

Nothing inside the abandoned dreadnought could explode, and very little of the structure could be damaged by the weapons at her disposal. Between her position and that of her squad, they had the krogan in a crossfire, but they were too well-armored for it to matter. Shepard continued firing and radioed her squad. “Block their path! Create a bottleneck!”

“On it,” Jacob answered, tersely. The krogan had them pinned. Nobody had time for something extra.

Nonetheless, shortly thereafter, a collection of debris limned in the blue glow of a mass effect field rose through the air and settled on the ramp. The junk blocked line of sight of up the ramp, and prevented more than a single krogan from firing on them at a given time.

Provided, of course, that they could get each one down before it moved into the clear and let the next one follow.

The trigger clicked on Shepard’s gun. She popped out the thermal clip and reached for a fresh one, almost without conscious thought. And then kept reaching, all the way to the bottom of her pouch. “Damn it.”
She threw the now-useless rifle to the ground and drew her sidearm. The pistol might as well have been a water gun, for all the threat it posed to the armored krogan. Shepard ground her teeth. “Should’ve melted down every last goddamn geth weapon we found—”

Massani took in the situation with a quick glance, and tossed her bag. “Catch.”

“Thanks.” She slammed in a new thermal clip and resumed her attack, leaving the pistol and bag where they fell beside her.

Which was when the batarian finally located his courage, grabbed the pistol and the bag, and made a run for it.

“Shit!” Massani turned away from the fight and fired on the fleeing man.

Shepard couldn’t see what happened, but something struck her shields from behind, and a fraction of a second later she heard her pistol go off. “What the hell—”

With both of them distracted, the leading krogan, only slightly wounded, charged her position. Shepard scrambled back on her hands and knees as he stormed over the crate, bending the top under his weight.

She caught Massani out of the corner of her eye. His face was set in a snarl, his attention fixed on the batarian. Then the krogan’s massive boot appeared over her face, and she rolled, her arm dangling off the ramp. The floor vibrated like a drum as it landed.

Her rifle lay across the ramp. She flung herself onto her side, seized it, and shot at his ankles. The krogan fell to one knee as his leg buckled. That enormous head turned to her.

Then he flew up through the air on a column of blue sparks, and slammed back into the ramp so hard Shepard nearly bounced off the edge. The world spun. Her stomach crawled halfway up her throat. Her head was a misery.

The krogan groaned. She gathered enough of her wits to send a bullet into his face. He shuddered once and lay still. Shepard looked back at her squad, and saw Miranda withdrawing her hand, the end of a biotic mnemonic gesture. Her brow furrowed.

“They’re slowing down,” Jacob said, as a voice over Shepard’s stolen radio called out for backup. The mercs were being overrun. Distracting the krogan force, maybe.

She sat up, slowly, massaging her scalp. If her skull was going to try to blow itself apart every time a sudden mass effect field appeared in her vicinity, she had a real problem on her hands. The effect wasn’t fading with time, and unlike traversing the relays, she couldn’t just wait it out.

Several meters back, Massani rolled the batarian over with the toe of his boot, muttering curses. “Stupid jackass. I’m losing money on this deal.”

Shepard gestured at the corpse. “What’s with the baggage?”

“Someone wanted this sorry bastard alive.” Massani spat. “He thought the Suns would protect him. He should’ve known better. The Blue Suns might be friendly with batarians but recruits are expendable.”

Jedore’s increasingly callous orders made that perfectly clear. Shepard got to her feet and retrieved her pistol along with the spare clips. “You know who I am?”
“A war hero who runs out of thermal clips in the middle of a routine battle.” He folded his arms. Here and there, exposed by gaps in his battered yellow hardsuit, extensive tattoos decorated the muscle.

“I spent two years dead,” she said, shortly. “And the geth never ran out of clips so clearly an engineer fucked up somewhere.”

Massani barked a laugh. It lent his face an odd look. Judging by the left half, the lines gathered around his eye and narrow mouth, the nondescript gray-brown of his thinning hair, Shepard deduced he was at least ten years her senior, and likely closer to fifteen. The right half was nothing but a mass of puckered scar tissue that barely moved with his smile. His eye was clouded over. She gave the batarian another glance. “You shoot well for a blind man.”

“I was aiming for his leg.”

It was her turn to laugh. Her squad joined them, Miranda all business, Jacob hanging back. The Cerberus operative put her hands on her hips. “Why weren’t you on Omega?”

Massani was unperturbed. “Your boss didn’t pay me to wait. You were late, and I had another opportunity. I should haul him back and recover some of the fee.”

“The Illusive Man will cover your losses,” Shepard cut in, before Miranda could respond.

Massani glanced between them. “And why would he do that?”

“Because he wants me very badly, and I’m willing to let him continue to believe that’s possible.” She didn’t care that she was saying it in front of Miranda. It was nothing she hadn’t said to the Illusive Man’s face.

Miranda checked her omni-tool. “We need to find Okeer fast. We’re running out of more than supplies.”

“This is too much like what Saren pulled in ‘83 with his cloning lab.” Ash died for that information, a price far higher than its value. A part of Shepard needed to know whether there was more to it. “The reapers helped him then. They’re helping the Collectors now.”

Jacob frowned. “We don’t know that for certain.”

It felt right. Shepard surged ahead. “We’re nearly at the labs. We’ll know soon enough.”

Massani switched out his thermal clip and cycled his rifle. “I’m game. You paid for it, after all.”

They left the batarian lying in his blood, and made for the top of the ramp. Between the loudspeaker and the radio, it seemed the krogan were winning the battle. They faced scattered patrols of increasingly disorganized mercs as they neared the facility. These field commanders were so green they couldn’t even manage their own orders. Instead, they called for protocols, memorized formations and strategies that were essentially useless against a team with the experience of Shepard’s squad.

Jedore offered no help. From her secure post hidden away somewhere on the base, she accosted her recruits for their “unbelievable” failure to neutralize a former spectre, two high-ranking Cerberus operatives, and a seasoned mercenary. Blind eye or no, Massani could easily earn his keep. Aside from his motives and demeanor he wasn’t much different from other special operations marines Shepard had worked with through the years.
The mercs gave it their best, though. Shepard’s anger grew with every recruit who fell, mostly aimed at Jedore, for putting her in a position where she had to kill them. She had half a mind to go looking for her later, if she wasn’t at the labs, and send a clear if short-lived message on the responsibilities of leadership.

At last, they came upon an assemblage of rotting decks and staircases that almost resembled a real building, and made their way upstairs. The computers and other equipment they passed along the way confirmed this was the lab. But they found no scientists, no other personnel. Shepard began to wonder if this was a fool’s errand after all.

She tagged open a hatch at the top of the structure and proceeded into the next room, as rusty as the rest of the place, but appointed with a number of lab tables, computer terminals, microscopes, and other scientific equipment. A krogan stood beside an oversized cloning tank. “Good. You’re finally here.”

The tank held an armored krogan, completely unconscious, his blue eyes staring blankly through the curved glass. Okeer himself had a brisk air. He didn’t bother turning away from the computer affixed to the tank as they approached. “These batteries will not wait while you play with idiotic mercs.”

“Not the smartest way to greet the heavily armed group that just kicked in your door.”

Okeer did turn then, contemptuous and disappointed. His head crest was so dark it was almost black. His eyes betrayed his great age. “The deceased Shepard has no reason to want me dead. You want what the Collectors gave me.”

She raised an eyebrow, surprised to be recognized, and the direct mention of the Collectors. Okeer took on a smug satisfaction. “Yes, I know of their interest in your colonies, and of you. All krogan should know you.”

Nothing about Okeer’s posture was threatening. She rested her hands on her belt, near her pistol, but not touching it. “You’re upset I destroyed the genophage cure that wasn’t really a cure at all.”

“On the contrary, I approve.” Okeer spread his arms wide. “I especially like the part where you obliterated Saren’s plans with nuclear fire. It has weight.”

In the back of her mind, Kaidan sat up against the armed bomb, clutching his wounded leg in both hands and pale as a ghost. The bomb’s countdown alarm wailed in the background. He looked up at her, those warm brown eyes of his that she knew so well filled with fear.

She pushed it aside. “It was the best I could do with the available resources.”

“Saren’s pale horde were not true krogan. Judging value by numbers is the mistake of outsiders, whether spectres or mercenaries, it makes no difference.” He rested a hand on the tank. “Jedore grows impatient. It is time for you to take me out of here.”

“Excuse me?” She crossed her arms. Taking Okeer and his pet project along wasn’t mentioned in their earlier communications.

“I’d like to hear what he has to say,” Miranda put in. “And conditions here are deteriorating rapidly. We should continue the conversation elsewhere.”

Okeer didn’t stir, his gaze fixed on the krogan within. “The Collectors granted me tech to create one pure soldier, one who can inflict upon the genophage the greatest insult an enemy can suffer. To be ignored.”
“So you don’t want to cure—”

“The genophage does not produce strong krogan. The only quality it filters is the ability to survive the genophage.” Okeer sneered. “The coddling that results from such a filter sickens me more than a thousand salarian curses. Let us carry the genophage. Let us find victory by climbing atop the dead, as krogan have always done. Let them fear my lance.”

The window beyond the lab displayed row after row of tanks, enough to produce hundreds or even thousands of krogan, given enough time. Okeer had thrown away all but one. Shepard’s eyes shifted back to him. “You’re as cruel and manipulative as those who sanctioned the genophage.”

“Perhaps. But I will restore the krogan, and one soldier will not provoke a… nuclear response.” Okeer smiled at her discomfort. “My legacy is perfection.”

Shepard decided then and there Okeer would never set foot aboard her ship. “I need whatever you know about the Collectors.”

“They are strange. So isolated, yet very available when your sacrifice is large enough. I gave them many krogan.”

The loudspeaker activated. Jedore’s cold rage obvious even through the distortion of the cheap equipment. “Attention. I have traced the krogan release. Okeer, of course.”

For the first time, Okeer seemed troubled. He rushed to the window. Far below, a slight woman with a cap of dirty blonde hair spoke into her radio. “I’m calling blank slate on this project. Gas these intruders and start over from Okeer’s data. Flush the tanks.”

Immediately, white vapor began to pour from vents in the lab. Shepard reached for her helmet without any conscious thought. Okeer was too upset for such considerations—not that an outsized lab coat provided much protection. “She’ll kill my legacy with a damn valve!”

Miranda grabbed her arm. “Shepard, we need his information.”

“I’ve wanted to kill Jedore since we set down anyway.” She drew her rifle. “Okeer—”

He turned back to the tank. “Go. I will… stay, and do what must be done.”

They hurried through a hatch at the far end of the lab, down a ramp, and into the tank room. Jedore was alone save for a handful of heavy mechs and krogan, newly flushed and too confused to organize. Though she shouted stridently, her orders were entirely ignored.

Shepard glanced at her squad. “Get the krogan. I’ll handle Jedore.”

“Copy that.” Jacob rushed ahead, Miranda close behind. Massani turned to the nearest mech.

It was slow going, but the lab offered plenty of cover. To Shepard’s absolute lack of surprise, Jedore kept to the far corner, with as much of her remaining forces and the lab itself between her and Shepard’s team. She started when Shepard appeared from behind a tank with a gun trained on her head. “Freeze.”

Jedore held her weapon like she barely recognized it. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You’re a bad leader, a terrible person, and you’re in my way.” Shepard tracked her as she moved sideways. “Take your pick.”
“How did Okeer get to you?” Jedore demanded. “I monitor all of his communications off-world.”

Shepard declined to explain herself. She gestured to a tank. “Get in.”

Jedore stared. “What?”

Across the room, Jacob shouted, “Krogan neutralized!”

Over her radio, Shepard heard Massani say, “Good. Now get your asses over here and take care of these mechs.”

Shepard took another step towards Jedore. “You heard me.”

Her look was pure poison. “I’d rather be shot, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Oh, but it’s not.” Another step. “Get. In.”

Jedore stared down the muzzle of her rifle, and swallowed. She stepped into the tank. The locking mechanism slid into place.

Shepard approached the console. Jedore raised her voice, hysterics muted by the tube. “What are you doing?”

She was never at home with strange technology. It took her a few tries to find the fill controls. Jedore began to shake as the nutrient bath covered her toes. “You can’t be serious!”

On the radio, Miranda said, “Heavy mech, nine o’clock.”

“I see it,” answered Massani. Shepard heard the distinctive sound of a rocket cycling into its left arm. Across the room, Massani fired. “Got it!”

The mech exploded at the same moment the rocket fired, badly off-course. Shepard flinched as it streaked past. Jedore screamed as it exploded against the tank, abruptly silence. Nothing was left but scraps of metal and cooling glass shards.

Not quite as satisfying, but effective. Shepard activated her radio. “Jedore’s dead. Let’s wrap-up.”

The last of the fumes were dissipating as they arrived back at Okeer’s facility. They smelled not quite the same as vinegar, strong enough even in the residual to tickle the inside of her nose. It felt wrong. Why did it feel so wrong?

Okeer slumped over a terminal, clearly dead, a hastily recorded vid playing on the screen. “The Blue Suns brokered my deal with the Collectors, but the tech was consumed by my process.” Vid-Okeer paused, straining for breath. “You gave me time, Shepard. If I knew why the Collectors wanted humans, I would tell you. But everything is in my prototype. My legacy is pure. This… one soldier. This grunt. Perfect.”

Jacob scratched his head. “Okeer’s ruthless, but he gave his life for this one krogan? Why?”

“I want to find out.” Okeer’s goals were clear enough, but his exact methodology remained mysterious. And this was the second time she’d found Suns in proximity to Collector technology. Shepard crouched near the tank, inspecting the battery meter, and activated her comm. “Shepard to Normandy.”

The delay was minimal at these distances, even at light speed. EDI replied promptly. “Standing by, Shepard.”
“I have a package that needs retrieval.”

A pause, and then Joker came on the line. “Commander, there’s no room near your location for the ship to set down. Can you carry it out?”

She looked at the tank. It was six tons if it was a kilo. “That’s a negative.”

Jacob said, “The shuttle can’t get it out either. Even if we weren’t taxing the lift capacity, it would never fit.”

Massani checked his gun, purely out of habit. “You could go back to Choquo and hire a lift. Without Jedore driving them the recruits won’t challenge us again.”

“Sounds good. Can we lock out the controls?” Shepard didn’t want anyone messing with the tank while they were gone, and didn’t want the hassle of posting a guard.

Miranda went to the console. They levered Okeer off the keyboard, and she typed a few queries. “I can switch control authority to us easily enough. There, done.”

They called in the shuttle and flew back to Choquo. Shepard sat back, tired, but in a good way. She wasn’t sure how much they actually gained with this exercise. But it was nice to be worn out from real work instead of endlessly stomping away at a treadmill belt like some kind of damned gerbil.

A few hours later, they were in Korlus’ disputed capitol. They were all tired and filthy from their long day fighting in the smog, and negotiating a transport for the tank could take some time. Miranda insisted they rent a room to get out of the heat.

Unlike the rest of Korlus, the suite was clean, done in pale blues and grays that defied the heat of the day. The furniture was a bit old but stylish for its time, and serviceable. Miranda was reasonably satisfied. Nothing like what one found in truly civilized space, naturally, but that was asking a bit much of a scrapyard world.

Jacob climbed in the shower first. Alliance marines, even ex-marines, showered faster than any people Miranda had ever met. Shepard said this was because ship VIs turned off the hot water after four minutes to encourage people to move along.

Massani scorned cleaning up at all. He seemed to prefer being crusty, in every possible sense of the word. He and Jacob headed back out to find a hauler and retrieve his personal possessions, leaving her and Shepard alone. Shepard was quiet on the shuttle flight, and for once content. Miranda didn’t question it; keeping the peace had become a full time job, and she appreciated any speck of downtime she could get.

When she got out of the shower herself, cinching her towel tight and combing out her wet hair, she found Shepard at the window, studying the people jostling on the street below with her arms folded. Miranda spoke. “It’s a sad little place, isn’t it?”

“Sad, maybe. Little, no.” Shepard turned back to the room and hooked her thumbs into her utility belt. She’d put her hardsuit back on. Not that she had a change of clothes— Miranda supposed she wasn’t comfortable enough to strip down to the undersuit. “It’s a hard life out here.”

Miranda retrieved a bottle of water and lay back on the couch, lounging a bit. A small indulgence of relaxation. “I understand the need to study Okeer’s prototype.”
“But?” Shepard was almost amused.

“I have concerns about waking it.”

She shook her head and paced the length of the window. “I haven’t decided what to do with him yet. Judging by the other krogan we met, nobody’s ever asked his opinion on anything. I’m not sure the confines of our ship are the best place to discover what he thinks.”

“This krogan was created and indoctrinated by a madman. I can guess what it might think.”

“You don’t find that interesting?” Shepard turned to her. “I should thank you. For getting the krogan off me, on our way up here.”

Miranda shifted, unreadable. “I was protecting a Cerberus investment. Don’t take it personally.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Miranda’s eyes slid to her. It was almost a joke. “I’m concerned about something else as well. You freeze up every time I use a biotic effect in your vicinity. At first I thought it was just surprise.”

“And then you realized that didn’t make any damn sense?” Shepard prickled reliably at any suggestion of weakness. “I’ve worked in close proximity with biotics before. I know what to expect.”

“That leaves an unfortunate selection of possibilities.” She regarded her casually, as though this was a chat about the weather. “Did you have an undocumented sensitivity to mass effect fields before you died?”

Shepard ran her fingers through her hair and turned away. “What does it matter?”

“It’s not out of the question that the synthetic portions of your nervous system could create amplified feedback.” Miranda got up and moved towards her. “If so, we need to address it medically.”

Shepard took a tidy step away. “We’re not talking about this.”

“Shepard—”

“I’m fine, Miranda.” That hint of exasperation had returned, the one that wasn’t exactly angry, but said back off.

Miranda raked the hair off her face, the wet strands sticking to her fingers. “Have it your way. You always do.”

Her expression changed. It looked almost like chagrin. “I didn’t mean... Do you know what it’s like to have someone know everything about you, when you don’t know the slightest thing about them? Wouldn’t you want some privacy, too?”

Privacy was a foreign concept for most of her childhood. She grew up well aware her father was watching or at least recording her every move— every success, every failure. She was monitored by a small army of professionals charged with molding her into the crowning achievement of her father’s life.

Now, she didn’t put herself in situations where personal vulnerability was a factor, and it wasn’t her
fault Shepard wound up in that position over Alchera. “We can’t always afford the things we want.”

“I’m handling it.” She let out a sigh, and changed the subject. “I’m starving. You want some food?”

She blinked, surprised. “Dinner would be appreciated.”

“Any requests?”

“I…” Miranda was off-balance. “I imagine any human food is hard to come by here, but I’ve developed quite a taste for Indian cuisine.”

“Me, too. I’ll see what I can find.” Shepard made to leave, no fuss, no barbs.

In fact, the conversation had gone so unusually smoothly that it took a few moments for Miranda to realize Shepard had paused at the hatch, with a strange look on her face.

Miranda frowned, a kernel of nascent unease settling in her gut. “Was there something else?”

Shepard inhaled deeply through her nose, saying nothing. She’d worn that expression before, most recently when they arrived back in Okeer’s lab, like she’d just noticed something odd or out of place, but couldn’t quite identify what.

Then she turned sharply, with an expression like a volcano just before the peak disappears. Like the stillness in the air above a fault line before the earth slips sideways and brings everything toppling down.

Miranda caught sight of it and froze, all comfort evaporated. Unconsciously, her feet arranged themselves into a fighting stance.

Slowly, enunciating every word, Shepard said, “Your shampoo…”

“Yes?” Miranda’s brow creased.

She squared herself to Miranda. Her voice had yet to be raised. “I can smell your shampoo.” She took a step. “I can smell it. I could smell Jedore’s gas, too.”

Miranda eased upright, still feigning relaxation, but with every muscle poised to spring. She’d rarely felt so threatened in her life, and Shepard wasn’t doing anything but staring at her. “If the scent offends you, we’ll be back on the ship with our own things soon enou—”

Shepard rushed her without warning, leaping over the couch, and pinned her to the window with enough raw strength to knock the air from her lungs. She shoved the muzzle of her pistol into the soft underside of Miranda’s jaw, pressing so deeply that she was forced to tip her head back just to get a breath.

“What,” Shepard growled, “Did you do to me, you unholy Cerberus bitch?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Miranda tried to remain calm, but her own weapon was across the room, and no amount of struggling budged Shepard so much as a millimeter. Her hands weren’t free to form the movements for biotics. The woman was solid muscle. “I saved your life.”

“When I died, I had no sense of smell.” Shepard pressed yet more closely to Miranda, her breath hot against her face. She was so tall. Miranda couldn’t equal her, especially barefoot. She had to
balance on her toes to avoid being choked—no chance of stomping down. Shepard couldn’t be bothered to care. “I lost it after a serious head injury. The brain, you see, is so very difficult to repair. *Why can I smell your shampoo?*

Miranda tried to speak. Shepard pressed the gun to her so violently she thought it might push through her skin. “*What did you do to my brain?*”

Miranda managed to meet her eyes. There was nothing in them but rage, fueled by just the thinnest stream of naked fear. “Basic neural implants. Just—”

She was forced to stop speaking as Shepard let out a savage growl and half-closed her throat with the pressure of the gun. She struggled for a breath. “Just three! Some parts of your body were—disconnected. We had to—had to establish—linkages—”

“You put implants in my head!”

“The Illusive Man wanted you just as you are.” Miranda took another strangled gulp of air, wondering why the hell anyone would want this banshee as she was. “All they did was restore n—nerve connections. Including to your—your nose.”

Shepard stared at her. Miranda knew that stare. She hadn’t been on the receiving end very often, but each time left its mark. It was the look of a person who was making up her mind—not whether to kill you, but whether to let you live. It was the look of somebody who had come to see killing you as the default option.

“You need me,” Miranda said, low and cold, with every scrap of defiance she’d ever had.

Shepard spat and dropped her. Her knees collapsed from the suddenness of it. She fell to the floor, gasping, the towel flapping around her.

“I will have a report,” Shepard said, in even, deadly tones, “On my desk, by this time to tomorrow. It will detail everything down to the fucking adhesive on these neural implants. Am I clear?”

Miranda massaged her throat, wiped the back of her hand over her face, smearing Shepard’s saliva. “As glass.”

Shepard spun on her heel and stalked out. Miranda entertained a brief fantasy of leveling a biotic attack at her retreating back, to caution her against reckless threats, but she knew better than to act in haste. Certainly she knew better than to anger the Illusive Man, who considered Shepard his most crucial investment. And there was also just the faintest doubt, deep at the back of her mind, facing down Shepard driven half out of her mind with rage, whether she would prevail.

But she would not be treated like this, no matter how distrustful or unsettled Shepard might be. Nobody—not even her boss—could expect this to stand.
Alenko stumbled into Club Bulu almost twenty minutes late for his date. It’d taken the better part of an hour to talk himself into not backing out. This felt all wrong. But what stopped him cancelling was the realization that it would never, ever feel right. The only realistic option was to get it over with.

That, and the specter of Mat’s whining. No date could possibly be worse.

He ran his hand over his face as he scanned the crowd for Nicholas Morel. The scratches over his cheek and forehead from the husk attack aboard the Cerberus frigate had faded to thin red lines now, still visible, still drawing the occasional lingering stare. It was just one more thing to feel self-conscious about.

Bulu was a series of rooms, each somehow part of a natural flow through the bar while maintaining their own character. It created a sense of intimacy despite the large size of the club. Everywhere, wood, plants, and clever lighting made it feel like a groundside veranda, exposed to the sun, rather than the fifteenth floor of a space station ward. Quietly energetic music wound through the greenery. Under any other circumstances, Alenko would have found it relaxing.

Moving through the crowd with all the grace of a wayward ping pong ball, Alenko at last spotted Morel at a high top table beside an honest-to-god pond. His back was to the room, hands folded, to all appearances utterly relaxed. He looked every inch as good as Mat indicated. Better, even.

And that wasn’t even the most intimidating bit. Alenko expected, late as he was, that Morel would be irritated, or embarrassed—tapping his fingers, pretending to have a conversation on his omni-tool, avoiding eye contact with the servers, all the little things people do when they’re trying to act like they’re not being stood up. Instead, Morel sat back in his seat, sipping at his drink and enjoying the music.

That was weird, right? Alenko thought it was weird. What if this was just the start? What if Morel had fifteen cats, or sincerely believed pancakes were better than waffles?

The tipping point wobbled beneath him and he started to go. However, at that moment, Morel shifted slightly, caught sight of him, and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Alenko experienced a horrific two seconds of complete paralysis before he managed to step forward. He distantly recalled once knowing how to do this, a dim lesson from another life. “I’m Kaidan.”

He approached, extended his hand automatically, and then cringed so hard he should have pulled a muscle. But Morel shook easily, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. “Nicholas. Good to finally meet you. Mat’s been chewing my ear off.”

Alenko laughed before he could remember to be self-conscious, because that was Mat all over. “Me, too.”

Nicholas motioned at the other chair. “Care to sit? I was about order another.”

The reminder that it was now thirty minutes past their agreed meeting time brought on another wave of discomfort. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt so out-of-place. Alenko hitched
himself up onto the empty seat without knowing quite where to look. “Sorry I’m so late. Rough day.”

Morel grinned. He had an easy smile, like not much rubbed him wrong. “Half the reason I picked this bar was that it isn’t a bad place to get stood up.”

“You do this a lot, huh.”

“Not especially.” He finished the drink and glanced around for a server.

Alenko folded his hands on the table and glanced at the pond, lacking any idea where else to look. “Yeah, I don’t, either.”

“I never would have guessed.”

He glanced up, but saw no accusations on Nicholas’ face. Only a friendly smile. He’d been teasing him. It caught Alenko off-guard. “Score one for Stealth Team Awkward.”

Nicholas laughed. Alenko got another dose of that strange-but-good feeling, making someone laugh. Maybe this wouldn’t be completely terrible.

A waitress materialized and took down Nicholas’ order for another rum and coke. Alenko selected a beer at random, based solely on the label sounding more human than the others. He’d never developed much of a taste for batarian brews, which were coarse and dark enough to put the best terran porter to shame, nor asari, which seemed to contain more herbs than beer yet maintained a deadly ABV percentage.

“Hungry?” she asked, as she finished entering the drinks into her datapad.

Alenko looked over at Morel. “Any clue what’s good here?”

“We’ll have the spring rolls,” he said. The server nodded and trotted off.

Alenko fidgeted with his napkin. “What makes them a favorite?”

“The chef imports the pork from this farm on Terra Nova—” He paused abruptly, chagrined. “Sorry, you’re not a vegetarian or anything, are you?”

Nathaly wrinkling her nose and picking bits of beef out of her supposedly-vegetarian freeze pack meal. Alenko cleared his throat and forced the memory back where it belonged. “No, I’m pretty omnivorous. Last time I visited Terra Nova I wasn’t there long enough to eat much of anything.”

“When was that?”

“A few years back.” They’d set down for refueling and debriefing at the base after preventing a hijacked asteroid from cratering into the capital. It seemed immodest to mention.

“My sister and her kids live in Ross, a few hundred klicks from the capital,” Morel said, as the waitress returned and deposited their drinks. “I get out there about once a year or so. Whenever a major holiday rolls around and our mother decides to go to Bermuda instead of hosting dinner.”

“My mom conveniently forgets every single year that I’m not usually able to make it home. It’s this battle of diplomacy that starts up every September, like clockwork.” Alenko rolled his eyes and took a sip of the beer. It tasted generic, factory-made, but wasn’t badly done for all that.

“Yeah.” Morel took a drink of his own, and leaned back in his chair. He was as relaxed as Alenko
was keyed up. “Mat mentioned you were still in.”

“Why’d you get out?” Alenko knew a lot of people served their contract and left, especially those who enlisted primarily for the education.

Morel chuckled. “You’d think being a navy doc would mean sewing up bullet wounds in the middle of a battlefield, but it’s mostly running STD panels and writing DMHS referrals. I never wanted to swab another crotch or have another patient break down in my office ever again.”

“And that’s why you went into pediatrics.”

His laugh was a bit louder this time. “Bingo. Sure, there’s still a lot of crying, but fewer existential crises. And most ailments are above the waist.”

His humor was infectious. Alenko found himself chuckling back in spite of himself. “That’s fair.”

“What made you go career?” Morel asked.

He considered which version of the truth to use. “I like helping people, and working a normal job bored me.”

More than that, he’d felt useless. Like he was wasting his time on worthless pursuits. It seemed tactless to say aloud.

Morel waited several moments in case he cared to elaborate, but Alenko couldn’t think of any more. So he took another drink and asked another question. “I imagine medicine comes with its share of long days, too.”

“Not so much today.” He sat back in the chair, lounging carelessly. “I should thank you, actually. You got me out of a vendor pitch over dinner the partners wanted all the associate physicians to attend.”

“Not quite as swanky as this?”

“More, if you like that kind of thing.” His tone said he didn’t. “It’s a VI firm.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

For the first time that evening, Morel went quiet, frowning. Alenko prodded him, somewhat against better judgment. Curiosity would be the death of him. “You know, I was an engineer, briefly, before I joined the marines. I’m pretty adept at treating technophobia.”

That at least got a small smile. Morel shook his head. “It’s not technology. It’s… well, you know the Huerta case, right?”

Earlier that year, UNAS President Huerta suffered a stroke, and amid much controversy the majority of his brain functions were transferred to a computer. Alenko was indifferent; he might remain a UNAS citizen, but their politics didn’t affect him much these days. “The Supreme Court ruled Huerta’s VI prosthetic didn’t disbar him from his office.”

“It’s not a prosthetic.” Morel was indignant.

“It’s been described that way. A prosthetic for the brain dead, like any other artificial organ.” It took some effort to keep his voice level. It was hard not to imagine Cerberus wiring a VI into Nathaly’s brain, something to ease the frustration of restoring the dead to life and avoid
disappointing the Illusive Man. How the hell was he to know, with as many artificial parts as they installed her body?

Not that it mattered, anymore. Lazarus Station was in pieces. Nathaly was truly gone. But somehow, it still made a difference what they did to her before she died.

Morel shook his head and put the drink down. “Your pancreas doesn’t determine who you are. Your kidney doesn’t remember your first day at school, or your mom’s tuna casserole. VIs have no emotive capacity. How much function can you subcontract to a machine before they’re not a person anymore?”

“If it’s indistinguishable—”

“A VI can connect events and memories with chains of logic, and follow instructions. Mention Aunt Jean and the VI can cough up that summer you visited her farm. If dad hugs you, the VI will hug back. But it’s empty. There’s no warmth in it. A VI can’t mean it.”

Alenko raised his eyebrows. “I take it you have personal experience.”

“Yeah.” He seemed a bit chagrined, as if he regretted raising the subject. “A few months ago, a three-year-old patient fell off a chair and bashed his head. His parents chose to install a VI. It’s sick enough to see that in an adult, but in a toddler? It’s like a meat-puppet.”

“I didn’t realize. I’ve mostly dealt with VIs in mechs.”

He shook his head and sat back. Looking awkward himself, for the first time that evening. “Sorry, this isn’t really... I guess you’re not the only one who’s forgotten how to have a proper date.”

“I don’t mind.” Polite, but also honest. “One thing about being a marine is you get pretty inured to morbid topics.”

Morel raised his drink in mock tribute. “I suppose our professions have that in common. Bad days involve body counts.”

“In my line of work, that one can go either way.”

He laughed, as Alenko hoped he would— the joke was pretty dark, but Morel seemed to trend that way, and it seemed to improve his mood. He still wasn’t sure why he wanted to make him laugh. Maybe he was just an easy person to talk to, and he wanted to talk just a little longer. “So how’d Mat talk you into this?”

“Oh, shit. I said maybe, and he called a week later and told me you were waiting for me to set it up.” Morel tilted his head. “You?”

“Big heaping pile of guilt, what else?” Alenko rolled his eyes. “We’ve been friends for fifteen years. He’s got all the dirt.”

“I’ll bet.”

At that moment, the waitress returned carrying a plate of spring rolls. She picked up Alenko’s empty bottle. “Another?”

“Sure.” He picked up one of the rolls and took a bite. “You know, these really are good.”

“So,” Nicholas said, wiping his mouth. “Speaking of medical matters.”
Alenko sat back and crossed his arms, more pretending to be put out than actually bothered. “Oh, here we go.”

He lifted his hands in an exaggerated gesture of futility. “You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“I never met a doctor who could resist talking shop.” Alenko grinned. “Should I just fax my records over, or do we want to pretend this is a two-way discussion?”

“I do have some small amount of tact,” he protested. “I couldn’t help but notice the scar. I hesitate to ask lest I dig my hole any deeper, but you seem a bit, ah, above the usual age for a biotic implant.”

The half-moon scar peeking out from under his hairline was the tell-tale sign of a biotic, the lower portion of a circular flap of skin removed when Alenko was sixteen, to install the device that allowed him to safely harness his abilities. “Close. I’m part of the first diagnostic group, from the Singapore exposure in ’51.”

“What’s that like?” Nicholas was all curiosity.

Those kinds of inquiries usually rankled, but then they were usually motivated by an agenda or framed with offensive assumptions. Nicholas’ interest was innocent by comparison. It left Alenko less wary than usual. “It’s got ups and downs. The implant gives me migraines, and there’s still a lot of harmful ignorance floating around. But at the end of the day... well, I could give you the responsible answer. It helps me do my job better.”

“What’s the less-than-responsible answer?”

He hadn’t been able to remember it for a long time, after what happened at BAaT. In a lot of ways, Nathaly gave that part of himself back to him. He offered Nicholas half a smirk and raised his beer. “One day you’re blocking bullets with the power of your mind alone, and the next you’re floating your drink across the room because you’re too lazy to get up.”

Nicholas laughed out loud. “Putting the cosmic forces of our universe to excellent use.”

Several hours later, and a few more drinks, upon discovering their apartments were only a few blocks apart, Alenko and Morel split a cab back to Zakera Ward and walked together from the taxi stand into their district. Most of the tension had eased away over the course of the evening.

“The rent out here is criminal,” Nicholas was complaining. “I don’t know about your building, but mine is threatening a thirty percent raise next year.”

“Could be worse. You should see what my parents pay back on Earth.”

“I’ve heard Vancouver is a tough market.”

Alenko paused in his step and furrowed his brow. Nicholas went slightly pink. Realization dawned. “You were spying on me.”

“Guilty. Can you blame me?” He put his hand over his heart. “Damned dry well, though. Hardly anything about you on the extranet.”

The flirt came out almost automatically. “Maybe I haven’t had much reason to use it.”

“You didn’t take even the smallest peek?”
“I… may have found your staff listing at your hospital.” He looked at him sidelong. “You’re better looking than your picture suggested.”

Nicholas laughed. “Can’t say I’m sorry for that.”

They reached a building marked Emerald Terrace. Alenko cleared his throat. “Well, this is me.”

“Ah.” They stood there for a long, awkward moment, glancing away and shuffling, before Nicholas finally leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “Thanks. I had a nice time.”

It struck Alenko then that it had been over two years since he had been the object of any kind of romantic gesture, and that he missed being touched. It was a physical sort of loneliness he usually thought himself above, but right now, feeling the longing welling up from the hollow place Nathaly left behind, he couldn’t deny it. And it surely didn’t hurt that he was one or two drinks over.

Much to his own surprise, he also realized that it had been a rather good first date, and furthermore that Nicholas had perhaps been lingering at the doorstep, hoping for an invitation upstairs. A bit of heat crept up his neck. It was nice embarrassment, though, feeling wanted. Casual intimacy had never held much interest for him. It seemed somehow dishonest. But it wasn’t difficult to imagine making out with him as an enjoyable experience— and a tempting one, too.

Maybe that was okay. Maybe after the past two years, he’d earned the right to a little guilt-free fooling around, or maybe this was the only way he’d ever be able to get over her loss. Fumbling, uncertain, trying whatever seemed right at that particular moment even if it got messy.

So as Nicholas walked away, Alenko spoke up before he could think better of it. “You want to come by sometime? We could order pizza, or something.”

His smile proved the suspicion was correct. “I’d like that. I’ll call you?”

“Sure.” Alenko stuck his hands in his pockets, and stood outside his building until Nicholas disappeared into the crowd, filled with an out-of-sorts, pleased kind of confusion that made him wonder if this was how it felt to finally start getting better.

The building let him through the hatch. He stepped onto the elevator and keyed his floor. As it ascended, the apartment VI said, “Good evening, Commander Alenko.”

“Did someone stop by?” he asked. There was little reason for the VI to bother him in the elevator otherwise.

“At 2117, your neighbor, Mr. Simon, reported a disturbance at your residence. Citadel Security arrived promptly.”

He blinked, all of the vaguely-articulated warmth from the date evaporating like dew. “What?”

The VI continued in that same inhumanly smooth tone. “Twenty minutes after that, they summoned their superior, Captain Bailey, who was admitted to the apartment on orders from C-Sec.”

Alenko glanced at the time. It was 2330. “What happened?”

“Captain Bailey is still compiling his report.”

“They’re still here?”
“Yes, Commander Alenko.”

The elevator opened. Alenko hurried out into the hall. For the last several weeks, he’d been dodging an unusual number of keepers performing system status checks, or whatever it was they got up to with the station interfaces, but tonight they’d disappeared. The corridor was empty, leaving a clear path to his door.

He thumbed the lock, as quickly as the system would allow. The lock beeped and the hatch slid sideways into the wall. His eyes went wide.

Every corner of his apartment had been tossed, floor to ceiling. Furniture sat overturned, cushions slashed open, a confetti of discarded books and smashed pictures scattered over the carpet. His vid terminal vomited broken wires. Even his plants had been ripped from their pots.

Alenko took a single step inside and felt something crunch under his shoe. He lifted his foot and saw a spider web of broken glass where there was once a functional datapad screen.

Several C-Sec officers looked up as he came in. The nearest held out his hand, palm up, a universal order to halt. “You can’t be in here, sir. This is a crime scene.”

“I’m Kaidan Alenko. This is my apartment.” He took another glance at the destruction and ran his hand over his hair, trying to sober up fast. “What the hell went on here? Why didn’t building security alert me?”

There was no chance the building VI hadn’t noticed the break-in. Every visitor was logged. Uninvited guests would automatically be challenged, and C-Sec summoned if they couldn’t explain themselves. And every resident, Alenko included, would be sent a message directly to their omni-tool regarding any incidents involving their unit. The tight security was one of the features that attracted them to the place, back in ‘83. Nathaly made a lot of enemies fighting Saren.

“That’s exactly what we’d like to know,” said a third man, coming out of the bedroom and stripping off a pair of disposable gloves. He had a weathered face and crew cut hair going to gray that made him look older than his years. His uniform was rumpled as though he’d been wearing it two shifts and then some. He crossed the debris and extended his hand. “Armando Bailey, captain of this precinct.”

Alenko shook, but his attention remained on the total destruction of his living room. “I hope you’ve got more answers than that.”

“Whoever did this managed to bypass building security. We’re still working out how. Citadel bureaucracy has a stick up its ass about due process for getting those kinds of records, even for simple inspection.” He snorted. Alenko was somehow reminded of Garrus. “Biggest question about the how is whether they shut down everything, or if this was an inside job— somebody who already had access to some or all of the building. Anyone else have door privileges on your apartment?”

He shook his head, distracted. “No.”

“Family member, girlfriend, cleaning service…?”

He cleared his throat, turned to the officer, and answered more firmly. “No. Just me.”

Bailey grimaced. “Biggest question of all, of course, is the why. They went to a lot of trouble to get in here undetected. A place only gets this kind of tore up from a search. Any idea what they were after?”
He started to shake his head again, and then paused mid-gesture. A cold chill skittered over his skin. “Maybe.”

Alenko crunched over the ruins of his worldly possessions and went into the second bedroom, which he repurposed as a home office. They hadn’t needed the extra room, but Nathaly wanted a bathtub, and on a station few one-bedrooms had the space for it.

The office was thoroughly trashed just like the rest of the place. The intruder pulled all the drawers free of the desk and dumped them over the floor, and apparently tried to access his terminal. But Alenko wasn’t concerned with that.

He stepped around the mess and went to the cabinet along the back wall. The door was ajar. He pulled it fully open and sighed, in disappointment if not surprise. The fireproof safe concealed within was unlocked. The important personal and sentimental items remained untouched, shoved aside, but the Collector implant and weaponry, and the Cerberus devices, were gone, as was the OSD with his copy of their findings from the last several missions and Lazarus Station.

Alenko sat back on his heels and massaged the bridge of his nose.

Bailey came in behind him. “I take it you guessed right?”

He looked up. “I need to contact my C.O. Right away.”

The serviceman on duty forwarded his message to Colonel Cook at home. The call lasted all of thirty seconds, and an anxious half-hour passed before Cook reached Alenko’s apartment. Bailey spent the time grilling Alenko, who steadfastly refused to answer most questions without his superior present. The technology wasn’t classified per se, but it wasn’t a matter of public record, either. No matter Cook’s blasé attitude, Alenko had assumed responsibility for the equipment, and now anyone might have it. He paced the room, evading Bailey and dreading Cook’s arrival.

Despite being well after midnight, Cook was as sharp and crisply dressed as ever. Alenko wondered, not for the first time, if the man ever slept, rather than switching off at the end of the day. His sole emotional expressions were irritation and indifference. Tonight, Alenko got the full brunt of the former.

Cook didn’t bother with preliminaries. “Commander Alenko, am I to understand that you have lost several pieces of critical technology, recovered at great cost from our adversary?”

He straightened. His hands slid behind his back, feeling odd adopting the stance in civilian clothes. “Yes, sir.”

“Perhaps you required explicit instructions when I allowed you special permission to take the articles home for further analysis.” Cook dropped each word like a nail into a coffin. “I assumed you appreciated the responsibility to secure them.”

Bailey interceded. “Alenko kept the missing… objects in a biometric safe. I don’t know how much safer they could’ve been.”

“I see.” Cook’s eyes were hard. They swept the ruins of the room. “Do we have a suspect?”

“One does leap to mind,” Alenko said dryly, thinking of Cerberus. They’d stolen most of it from them. It stood to reason they might want it back.

Bailey glanced between them, increasingly annoyed. “This is a C-Sec matter. If you are withholding valuable information—”
“This is a matter of Alliance national security,” Cook interrupted, coldly, his gaze fixed on Alenko, who stood a bit straighter out of reflex.

Bailey let out a grunt of frustration, but switched tactics. “Is anything else missing? Anything less sensitive?”

Alenko gestured at the disaster of an apartment. “How should I know?”

“Just take another look around.” Bailey was exasperated.

Alenko glanced at Cook, who nodded curtly. So he began to circle the room.

He ignored the wreckage of his desk. Everything important was on the terminal, and he wasn’t going to be able to determine if it was breached with a five minute check. It was open, though, and Alenko never failed to shut it down when he was done. So that was suspicious.

Like most offices in small homes, the room had accumulated a large amount of miscellaneous possessions, things that had no logical place anywhere else. A dusty weight rack in the corner, a remnant from the long-gone days when leaving to visit the gym felt like climbing Everest. His burglar had flipped it over onto the yoga mat that he still used.

Alenko turned his attention to the closet. Spare bedding, old gear, a bag of clothing he kept meaning to donate. Ruined now, turned to ribbons. “What’s up with all the knife work?”

“Huh?” Bailey said.

He gestured. “Every soft object in this place is slashed apart. It’s overkill, even for a search.”

Cook picked up the bag. “Not knife work. These cuts are too long.”

Alenko continued sifting through the lot of it, in a kind of daze. Why go to this much effort? What had they taken from Cerberus that they couldn’t reproduce themselves or through further conflicts with the Collectors?

Bailey stood over him, frowning. “Nothing.”

“No—” he started to say, shaking his head, and then his eye caught on something just beyond the far edge of the closet’s yawning door. A square cardboard box upended over a small mountain of picture frames. For a moment his heart stopped.

He forgot Cook. He forgot Bailey, and C-Sec. He scrabbled through the trash and broken glass with increasing panic, because the two items he sought weren’t easy to miss. There was no flag in its heavy wooden case. There was no jacket.

“What is it?” Bailey hadn’t missed his change in demeanor.

Alenko licked his lips and just barely stopped himself wringing his hands. “It’s not— it’s not important.”

Not important. He almost laughed, but the impulse was tinged with hysteria. He’d never imagined losing them. Who would want things like that?

Maybe some of it got flung elsewhere. He dove back into the closet, and spent a frantic minute sifting through the tangle of sheets dropped unceremoniously onto its floor. Spied a patch of brown and clawed at it, until it became a sleeve, and then an entire jacket piled into his lap. He let
go a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

Cook had no patience for his antics. “Answer the question.”

He cleared his throat, which was suddenly quite dry. Tried not to clutch at the jacket, even though his fingers kept running along the collar, reassuring himself it wasn’t gone. “A memorial flag. From the war.”

“Like the kind they use to bury people?” Bailey’s brow furrowed. “Whose?”

“A friend’s,” he answered, stiffer and more quickly than he liked.

Bailey wasn’t dissuaded. “I see.”

Alenko’s eyes strayed to Cook, without any conscious intention. Bailey noticed that as well. He nodded to the other officers. “Fellas, I need the room.”

They set aside their tasks and filed out. He folded his arms and addressed Cook. “You too, Colonel. I respect your interest here, but it’s my job to keep this ward safe.”

Cook hardened his expression, but apparently concluded any interrogations of his own could wait for tomorrow. Possibly he didn’t care about personal keepsakes at all. “Commander Alenko, I hold you personally responsible for the timely recovery of this technology. I expect to see a plan in the immediate future.”

He got to his feet, jacket still in his hands. Not certain at that moment that he would ever let go of it. “Understood, sir. You’ll have it.”

Cook gave them both a cold nod and departed. Bailey turned to Alenko. “Your thief tore this place apart, and all they took were several pieces of priceless tech, an OSD, and a damned flag. It’s not stretch to imagine these items are somehow connected.”

He folded the jacket fussily, smoothing it to excess, careful and precise. Took another breath, trying to calm himself, to sound like a normal person. “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

Bailey wasn’t convinced. “What’s with the jacket? You’re holding it like a holy relic.”

“Why do you care?”

Instead of arguing, Bailey went to box himself, and inspected the garbage strewn at its base, until he found a picture frame that still worked. Alenko reached out to stop him before he could think better of it.

Bailey held it up. The digital image fritzed in an out, crossed by horizontal black lines, but clearly showed Nathaly, laughing in that stupid beachside bar on Abael as she leaned into Alenko. “You keep this with that flag?”

“She’s been dead for two years,” he said, evenly. “We found the first of the devices eight months ago.”

“Really.” There was a sour note in Bailey’s voice, a kind of experienced cynicism that came from watching several unfortunate pieces fall together.

Alenko didn’t like it. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean this is a somewhat compromising picture of you and a famous dead woman best known for
killing the galactic council and pissing people off.”

He rubbed his eyes, weary. “It’s what it looks like. What do you want from me?”

“And you don’t want to talk about it because—”

“She was my C.O., alright?” It came out cross. “And then the ship blew up, and she died, and her mom offered me the flag. I didn’t ask for it. And no, I have no idea why they stole it.”

“But you have some idea who stole it.” It wasn’t a question.

Alenko watched Bailey for almost a full minute. “Could have been a human terrorist organization called Cerberus. And no, I’m not telling you why they’re suspect.”

“There’s been rumors out of the Terminus Systems that people have seen a dead spectre walking around.”

“There’s been rumors like that since she died.” He rubbed his face, desperately wanting to climb into bed and pretend this wasn’t happening. “Look, Nathaly has nothing to do with what happened here toni—”

Then he stopped. A horror swept over him. “Shit— shit— damn it!”

Bailey’s eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

“Cerberus had her prints. Probably other things, too.” Part of him was back on the flitter with Liara, staring out at the ruins of Lazarus Station. He swallowed and looked over at Bailey. “You asked who else had access to this apartment. Nathaly did. We rented it together, just before the ship went down.”

Bailey cursed as well. Alenko felt like he had to paper over this mistake, somehow. “She never lived here.”

“But you never took her off the door.”

“She’s dead. What did it matter?” But it seemed like it had obviously mattered quite a lot, just now. Cerberus knew they’d been together. They had every piece of biometric data and then some, more than enough to get in without tripping an alarm.

Bailey massaged the bridge of his nose, as if he couldn’t believe he had to work in the midst of such stupidity. He handed back the frame. “Just what we needed. Terrorists running around with spectre biometrics at their disposal. Goddamn, this is going to be a lot of paperwork.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s troubling here,” Alenko said with heavy sarcasm. “The paperwork.”

“Don’t give me that crap.” Bailey shook his head. “You can’t stay here tonight. We’re still collecting evidence, and you’re bed’s ruined.”

He groaned. “This guy even slashed the mattress?”


He looked around his apartment again. Blew out a breath, ran his hand over his hair. There was nothing about this that wouldn’t look better in the morning. So he trundled down the hall, stepping over the garbage that once comprised his material possessions, set the picture down on the
nightstand, and started sorting out what he could still use. Good grief, but the Cerberus agent had even sliced through the book he was reading. A ghost of a thought had crossed his mind, that Nathaly somehow survived and came here herself, under Cerberus’ direct control, but the sight of it killed that particular nightmare. She’d dog-ear the pages and scribble tiny rants in the margins, but she would never outright destroy a book, not even out of pique.

He duct-taped together an overnight bag, and threw in her jacket along with a change of clothes and a toothbrush. Then he left the apartment to C-Sec, for whatever they could make of it.
August 2185

It was hour eight. Miranda sat in her quarters, tapped her fingers on the desk until she caught herself, and tried to think for the thousandth time how in god’s name she would explain to the Illusive Man that Shepard was gone.

All through the transfer of the krogan tank to the ship, Miranda assumed she was blowing off steam in that peculiar physical way she had, and wasn’t sorry for it. She was still incandescently angry herself. Putting a gun in her face, threatening her life, for absolutely nothing. For doing what was required to save Shepard’s life. For doing what was required to keep this mission moving forward— an undertaking, she noted with acid precision, in which Shepard herself expressed only an erratic interest.

She watched the Normandy crew wrestle the tank into a cargo hold and imagined a hundred stinging lectures. A dozen subtle retaliations. Poisoning her drinking water with mood suppressors in lieu of strychnine.

Then the hauler pulled away, and Miranda realized Shepard still had not returned. There were no messages from the surface, no crappy hired shuttle sidling up to the airlock all abashed from her outburst. Not even a childish comm transmission proclaiming her independence and forcing them to chase her. Not that Miranda was bloody likely to offer an apology, much less beg her to return.

Ninety minutes after that, Miranda relented enough to put out a quiet search through Choquo. Few systems in the capital were secured. None of the ones EDI had yet crawled through had seen a trace of Shepard.

The commander had simply disappeared.

Miranda tapped her fingers again and then lay her other hand across them with some force, to still them. The crew grew restless. They all wanted to leave, and some of them had realized Shepard was not aboard, and that this fact had been neither acknowledged nor explained.

“EDI,” Miranda said, staring into the middle distance. “Please ask Jacob, Dr. Chakwas, and Mr. Moreau to come to my quarters immediately.”

“Yes, Operative Lawson.” A pause as she relayed the order. “Mr. Moreau requests to attend remotely.”

His legs. Of course. “I agree on the condition that he seals the bridge. I don’t want eavesdroppers.”

A few minutes later, Jacob and Chakwas entered. She gestured at her chairs, her polite mask sliding into place with the unconscious ease of long practice. “Please, sit.”

“Is Shepard back yet?” Jacob asked, without preamble. Her absence had been impossible to disguise when he returned with Massani. Miranda doubted Massani had any opinion on the matter at all; he only wanted to be paid.

Her smile went slightly brittle. “We need to consider the possibility that she may not be returning.”
Chakwas sat up, alarmed. “What do you mean?”

“It should come as no surprise to this group that Shepard has significant reservations about cooperating with Cerberus, regardless of the urgency our mission.” She folded her hands neatly. “She reiterated these sentiments before she walked off.”

Joker joined them from the ceiling speaker. “No way. Shepard’s got a temper, but she wouldn’t just up and leave.”

“I have to agree with Jeff,” Chakwas said. “The commander is no stranger to rash decisions, but her sense of loyalty is ironclad.”

It took everything Miranda had not to break into wheezing laughter, gale upon gale of it. “I don’t believe Commander Shepard has a shred of loyalty for Cerberus.”

“To her mission. To her crew.” Chakwas was thoroughly earnest. “She would never abandon that.”

Jacob cleared his throat. “I didn’t know her before, but it doesn’t seem a stretch to imagine Shepard hasn’t been quite herself lately.”

Joker made a sound of disbelief. “You think? She’s always been kind of tightly wound but this has been like when Ash died, taken up to eleven.”

Miranda’s interest piqued. “You’re referring to Gunnery Chief Williams.”

Chakwas bit her lip. “Commander Shepard took her death extremely hard. She considered it a personal failure.”

Joker was more colorful. “For a few weeks there it was like the ship got transported onto the set of Starless. Staring at walls and rending garments and, you know, threatening to kill things. I think she punched Garrus once.”

“How’d she snap out of it?” Jacob asked.

Chakwas hesitated. Joker did not. “Kaidan talked her around. Say what you want about our L.T., he had Shepard figured out right down to her cotton socks.”

“I tried to convince her to contact him.” Chakwas sighed. “Self-reliance is a doubled-edged sword. A sharp one, in Shepard’s case.”

“Yeah.” Joker snorted. “She runs into that one a lot. Part of her charm.”

Miranda didn’t believe Shepard had a single ounce of charm to her name. “Unfortunately, we do not have access to any of Shepard’s closest associates.”

“Then I advise waiting.” Chakwas rose. “Shepard processes things in her own time. She’ll come back right as rain, you’ll see. She always manages somehow.”

“Thank you.” Miranda watched her leave. Then she said, “EDI?”

“Mr. Moreau is attending his duties. The bridge is open once more.”

Jacob continued to lounge in his chair. She sighed. “Not now.”

“What really happened?” He eyed her, and wouldn’t let her squirm away.
So she told him, in a few short, clipped sentences. “Then she dropped me and stalked out.”

He stared at her for a long moment. Then he let out a low whistle and shook his head. “You do have a way with people, Miri.”

“You’re making this my fault? I was attacked!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Miranda kept a chilly silence, turned back to her terminal and brought up a report. Her fingers moved through the holographic keys with excessive force. Jacob cleared his throat. “Look, I won’t defend Shepard’s threat—”

“She put a gun to my head.” Miranda didn’t look up from her screen. “I’m in an impossible position. She’s not ready to lead, not without the substantial psychiatric care we planned to give her, but the Illusive Man will hold me responsible if I tell him to can the mission so soon. If I ever see Rasa again—”

“I don’t think you should report this to the Illusive Man at all,” Jacob said.

Miranda went rigid, indignation and betrayal rolling off her skin in waves. “Shepard tried to kill me!”

“If Shepard tried to kill you, you’d be dead.” He shook his head. “I’ve never seen combat reflexes like hers. Sometimes it’s almost like she knows what’s going to happen before it starts.”

“She pushed a pistol barrel into my throat.”

“Not excusing it, but…” Jacob scratched the nape of his neck and looked away. “You haven’t exactly tried too hard to see this from her perspective.”

“*Her perspective*—”

“Cerberus saved you. Of course you defend them with every breath. I’m not faulting you for it.” He spoke with a tedious patience. “But Shepard’s first experience with Cerberus involved fifty marines under her command dying in a brutal fashion far from home. I know you can’t understand that, not really, because you’ve never been a marine, and Cerberus thinks differently about casualties.”

She was so tired of hearing it she could vomit. “That was one incident, from a rogue cell.”

“Let me put this in terms you can understand.” He sat forward. “Imagine that last run turned out different and we got caught in Jedore’s gas.”

Miranda rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

Jacob continued steadily, framing the story. “You wake up years later in a hospital bed. You’re all alone, no trace of your team. Then somebody comes into your room. It’s your father.”

Her indulgent smirk faded. She glanced away.

“You’re back at his house, and he’s telling you everything that happened twenty years ago was a big misunderstanding.” Jacob was inexorable. “When you react with hostility, he’s annoyed, like it’s your fault. When you bring up what he did to you, he’s impatient, insists it wasn’t important. When you’re defensive, he suggests you’re mentally unbalanced.”
Miranda attempted a weak justification. “Shepard has experienced significant trauma.”

“He saved your life and claims that outweighs history. He’s shocked by your lack of appreciation. Your lack of decorum.”

“I am not my father.” Her voice could freeze hydrogen.

But it didn’t faze Jacob. He’d heard it all before. “To top it all off, you’re isolated from your allies, you’re disoriented after losing years of your life, and you’ve got so many unanswered questions you can’t think straight. Leaving isn’t a viable option.”

Then Jacob dropped the final stone. “And just when you’ve reached the beginnings of trust, accepted your situation—you find out he lied. He messed with your head.”

Miranda was silent almost an entire minute. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

He got up and stretched. “I am not defending how she’s treated you. Us. And I imagine this isn’t the first time her temper’s landed her in a world of trouble. But you put her here, on this ship, so you own that much. It’ll take both of you to fix it.”

“Jacob,” she said, when he was at the threshold of the hatch.

He turned. Miranda swallowed. “What do I do?”

“You might try being yourself.” Jacob cleared his throat. “I know you, the real you. I think she’s someone Shepard would trust. Maybe even like. But you’re not going to get there being preoccupied with promoting and defending the party line. Nobody warms up to a mouthpiece.”

She scoffed and folded her arms. “You know, the Alliance never did me any favors. Nor Shepard from what I’ve seen. Cerberus didn’t make all that mess of her, not even close.”

“Alliance is family. Outsiders don’t get to talk shit about family.” He made to go.

EDI interrupted, speaking with her usual uninflected voice from the ceiling-mounted speaker. “Operative Lawson, I have reviewed Commander Shepard’s financial data. She made a large transaction in the vicinity of Korlus six hours ago. Cross-checking with recent transactions in Choquo, I postulate with 92.7% certainty that Shepard purchased transport from Korlus to Omega.”

Miranda put her head in her hands. “Has the ship departed?”

“The transport in question passed through the relay three minutes behind schedule, at 12:13 am TCU.”

“That’s just…” She massaged her forehead. “Perfect.”

Jacob glanced from the speaker to Miranda. “So, what are you going to do?”

She licked her lips and stared into space.

He stepped back into the room, coming into her line of sight, forcing her to look at him. “Miri. What are you going to do?”

Shepard stepped out of the airlock and into the steaming underbelly of Omega. After she left Miranda, she intended to walk off her rage, and found she just kept walking—all the way to the
spaceport. It took some time to find a ship off Korlus willing to take an armed human passenger, and calling the accommodations crude was insult to the crudeness of the world, but it got her here. She took her first big breath of free air in over two years.

And promptly coughed up half a lung. Omega’s atmosphere was more akin to a soup than a gas.

A pair of salarians standing nearby tittered. She gave them a shrug— hell, it was kind of funny, being such a tourist— and set off hubward, taking shallower breaths until she cleared the docks.

She was finally free of Cerberus. No more half-assed excuses, no more lying to herself about making it work. No more being constantly watched by the Illusive Man’s slaved AI and pet operative. No more damned copy ship dollhouse.

There were thousands of medical centers in the galaxy. Hundreds of thousands. One of them would be able to explain what happened to her, and they’d charge a far more honest price. There were any number of other ways to take out the Collectors, too. She wasn’t giving up.

But tonight, she was going to sleep in a real bed, without EDI looking over her shoulder and without the SR-1’s laid-open hull staring her in the face every damn time she glanced up at the skylight. Before that, she was going to eat a meal cooked by a person whose concept of vegetarian cuisine extended beyond “pick out the meat bits”. Maybe have a drink or two.

She wandered back to the marketplace, and from there sought a bar that didn’t scream seediness but wouldn’t blanch at her hardsuit. She wasn’t in the mood for a fight. Eventually, that search led her to an unassuming hatch attended solely by a handful of batarian patrons sharing a cigarette. They didn’t give her a second glance.

The music streaming through the metal obviously indicated a club, but Shepard saw no signage. She figured it might be a delivery entrance. The hatch was open, so she went inside.

The whole room was lit red, including live flames. Small tables circled a large bar. Images on electronic walls pulsed to the thick bass and rolling sound, the kind of thing that inspired languorous, dreamlike dancing, and indeed, a small number of patrons hung close to the walls, undulating with half-lidded eyes. Not all of the smoke came from cigarettes.

Shepard found a seat and a discreet asari server presented her with three menus— food, booze, and drugs. She ordered off the first two and kept the third, not out of much interest for ordering, but a kind of nostalgia. Nehal took her to a place like this on their second date, when they met on Demeter. They giggled over the menu in a corner booth, trying some indica strain with a whimsical name even though Shepard hadn’t had pot since she was in high school, because Nehal always had the effect on her.

She laid the menu aside. Thinking about Todd was one thing; he was easy, their break-up explainable and endurable despite how much it smarted. Forgetting Nehal had taken years of concentrated effort, long after Shepard fell out of love with her, and it took a lot to break past that discipline. A sign of how bad these past weeks had been.

Instead, she surveyed the bar for other distractions. There was no form of entertainment whatsoever beyond the music and a scattering of asari professionals writhing in select booths. No quasar machines, no trivia consoles. Not even one news vid.

Music suited her just fine. She was beyond mortally exhausted, and rightly or wrongly, she felt safer here than she ever had aboard the SR-2. Probably wrongly, because this bar couldn’t possibly be better than differently dangerous. She wasn’t the only armored person present and she
could spot at least five other people likely or obviously with a gun about their person. But a reprieve was a reprieve.

She half-dozed in her seat, letting her mind float with the melody and surfacing occasionally for a bite of food. She drank slowly but eventually lost track of the number, as she lost track of how long she sat there. Since she kept buying, the server didn’t seem to mind her lingering. The place had slow turnover.

But as they moved towards local evening, the crowd picked up, and soon her server had better things to do. She stirred a bit, and that small wakefulness brought several things to her immediate attention. First, this was way too long to be in a hardsuit, especially when most of it was spent here or sitting on a cramped ship. Second, her glass had been empty for some time, and her mouth tasted like mothballs.

She really wanted some water, but this was Omega, and drinking anything that didn’t come out of a bottle seemed unwise. So she staggered out of her seat, her head spinning briefly, and made her sea-legged way to the bar. She could at least wash the fuzz off her tongue.

The batarian bartender wore a sour expression that only grew worse when he saw her waiting.

“What do you want?”

“Double shot, neat. Whatever human whiskey you have.” Surely, that was high enough proof to kill whatever was crawling around this station.

He rolled all four of his eyes and turned his back to pour the drink. She tapped her fingers on the counter and took the opportunity to scan the room. She’d done the quick assessment when she walked in hours ago— how many people, who had weapons and hiding places for same, who looked surly, the location of each hatch— but the crowd had changed, and some instincts couldn’t be shut down.

The music had grown slowly more energetic. In the shadowed corners, subdued private conversations had replaced bored day-drinking. More asari had shown up, dressed in slick plastic so tight it was only one small step up from paint.

The bartender grunted and slammed her drink on the counter, nearly upsetting it. She transferred the credits, skipping the opportunity to tip, took the glass and rolled a sip around her mouth before knocking it back.

The liquor hit her stomach. The room lurched sideways.

Her vision blurred into a pulpy red fog— the club’s miasma of color and noise smeared out, roiling in her gut. At first she assumed she’d just passed from moderately to severely drunk. But then a shudder ran through her body, almost a convulsion. Something was very wrong. It was right there in front of her, but she couldn’t bring the ragged ends of her thoughts together.

Someone seized her arm in a grip hard enough to bruise and dragged her forward, stumbling. She jerked, a pathetic resistance. It was like the strings of her muscles were cut loose.

A blast of colder air hit her face. Before she could get her bearings, fingers clamped on her jaw, forcing her mouth open, and another hand pressed down her throat. She tried to bite down but her assailant had her jaw in vise grip, and the fingers prodding at her airway were protected by the mesh gloves of a hardsuit, a gritty taste of carbon on her tongue.

Her gut heaved. Shepard pitched forward on her knees as her entire day came spewing out her
mouth. The invasive fingers vanished; instead, a flat palm rubbed her back. “Easy, easy.”

Shepard’s first instinct was to buck the hand away and prepare to attack, but her throat burned as if she’d coughed up lighter fluid, and there was a hard black stone in her stomach, almost like a bruise, that screamed poison. The sick feeling receded enough to think. Her eyes cleared. She was on all fours in a filthy alley, the same place she entered the club. The muted music pounded against the hatch behind her.

The human figure crouched before her wore a scuffed brown hardsuit sticky with her vomit up to the knee. She lifted her eyes a bit further. An all-too-familiar face peered down at her, swarthy, space-pale, auburn eyebrows scrunched up in concern. “Nath?”

Shepard tried to blink away her confusion. “Rag? What the hell?”

“Oh my god.” All the remaining color left Commander Laine’s face. “It really is you.”

He seized her by the shoulders and gave her a sharp shake. “How the fuck are you alive?”

Before she could respond, he kissed her forehead and folded her into a fierce hug.

Her stomach gave another troubling lurch. “Rag?”

“What?”

She took a deep breath. “Let go of me.”

“Oh.” He glanced down at his arms wrapped around her in surprise. “Right. Sorry.”

She got to her feet, refusing his offer of help, and tried to look more like she was leaning than sagging against the bulkhead. It felt like the drink scraped the skin off her throat. She scrubbed her brow with the back of her hand, more irked by Rag’s shell-shocked gesture of affection than the poison. “What are you doing here? Last I heard spec ops marines didn’t go into the Terminus alone.”

“Well.” He cleared his throat, and glanced away. “I, uh. I let my navy contract run out.”

“What?” Shepard blinked. They’d been in spec ops together since their N1 days. No matter their falling out, Laine was as committed as they came. “Why?”

“It all went to hell, Bo. Command’s had us hunting damn near non-existent geth, going on treasure hunts to completely dead worlds without even telling us what we’re after, good people dying for fucking nothing… None of it helping our colonies out here.” He shook his head. “No trust at all. Whatever’s coming, the future’s in the Terminus. The Alliance is just to chicken shit to act on it.”

“So you’re freelancing?”

“Aren’t you?” He gave her a shove. “Which reminds me again— what the hell? We had a funeral for you.”

“I only woke up a few weeks or so back.” She didn’t need Rag giving her garbage, too. She came up with enough on her own. “I’m trying to stop the attacks on human colonies.”

“Yeah?” Laine folded his arms, chewed his lip. “We should talk. Not here.”

“Someone tried to poison me.” Her head still spun every time she took a breath. If she’d been more coherent, the whole thing would have been hysterical, if only because it wasn’t close to the
strangest thing to happen to her lately.

Laine shook his head, looking back at the club again. “Every human in Afterlife knows not to order from that guy. He’s got a stick up his ass about us. Just a garden-variety batarian blowhard who can’t get over his issues.” His eyes cut Shepard. “Then I saw this customer who looked just like a dead woman take a drink.”

“How about this.” Shepard managed to stand up straight, without the assistance of the wall. “You tell me what’s going on with this station, and I’ll tell you all about being dead.”

“Deal.” He held out his arm.

Shepard scoffed, took a step, and then the floor flew up and met her face.

\begin{verbatim}

The first thing she felt was the greasy blanket against her arms. Which meant her hardsuit was somewhere else.

Her eyes creaked open after a few tries. The lids could have massed ten kilos each, crusty at the corners. She could feel the fluid dried where it ran down her cheeks. The inside of her nose was an absolutely unholy place, her mouth unspeakable. Her dry tongue ran over her lips and tasted old scabs.

She looked out at a bulkhead, close enough to touch if she stretched out her arm. About right for a station bedroom. So she was still aboard Omega. The bed had a sunken feeling to it, like it was once a halfway decent mattress that had been badly neglected and formed a hollow around its usual occupant, and the sheets stank of human everything.

The thin hatch slid aside. Laine brightened. “Look who’s awake.”

Shepard tried to push herself to a sitting position. It took more effort than she expected; her arms were rubber. “Where am I? Why does my tongue taste like badly burnt toast?”

“That’s the activated charcoal.” Laine perched on the nightstand, the only other piece of furniture in the room, and crossed his legs. “Vomiting got most of the poison out, but I had to soak the rest with something. The hospitals around here aren’t worth shit.”

Which was when she realized where she had to be. She groaned against the pair of sad, defeated pillows, bereft of any fluffiness they may have once possessed. “Waking up in your bed. Just what I never wanted.”

“A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” He flashed her a big shit-eating grin.

“I should punch your face.” But instead she swung her feet over the side of the bed and contemplated walking. “Feels like I haven’t pissed in days. You got a bathroom somewhere?”

“Head’s just down the hall.” He offered a hand.

She wasn’t too proud to take it this time. Shepard might be stubborn, but she wasn’t a fool. “You ever think about washing your sheets?”

“Since when do you wash your sheets?”

She tried not to lean on him too heavily as they made their way. “I wash them more than never.”
He tagged the hatch. “Got an extra toothbrush by the sink, and there’s towels in the cabinet over the toilet if you want a birdbath.”

Shepard glanced down. She wore some ratty shirt of Laine’s and her own underwear. Both looked like she’d vomited at least a few more times. “Just like the old days.”

“Been awhile since I relived any of those shore leaves.” He glanced at her, and the smirk faded. “ Seriously, Nath. Take it easy a bit. It was a closer thing than you think.”

“Thanks,” she said, meaning it. He let her go and she started figuring out the bathroom situation.

By the time she’d brushed her teeth and gulped a few handfuls of water— Laine had a purification wand stashed by the tap— she felt sure enough of herself to attempt a shower. In Shepard’s experience, there was very little hot water and soap couldn’t infinitely improve, even being poisoned to within an inch of her life.

The sutures were healing, too. Most of the stitching had been dissolved and absorbed by her body, and the lines were fading down to pink. That was a positive sign. The cybernetic scars remained livid as ever.

When she finished, she found Laine left fresh clothes outside the hatch. The track pants were ten centimeters too short, and too big everywhere else, but the drawstring kept them up. She pulled the shirt over her head and wandered out to the main living area.

Laine had a shabby apartment with a view down into one of the old quarries, building lights twinkling into a black pit of nothing. Shepard wrinkled her nose. “How did you managed to bring the bachelor stench with you?”

“I bottled it.” Laine had busied himself at the two-burner cooktop. “I don’t spend enough time here to bring down the clutter, but it’s hygienic. I promise.”

It was the epitome of Rag. A sagging couch that would suck someone hopped up on stim pills into sleep, carpet worn but reasonably clean, a round dining table that looked like it had seen more service as a card table with all manner of assorted gear scattered over its surface. Shepard recognized several pieces of her hardsuit along with her rifle.

Shepard cleared her throat. “How long was I out?”

“Little over two days.” He slid something onto a plate and handed it to her. “Here. Eat.”

She looked down at slightly burnt scrambled eggs. But she accepted a fork, and began bolting them like she’d never seen food before.

He leaned back against the counter. “You look like hell.”

“I was poisoned.”

“You should be dead. I’ve never seen anyone survive whatever he’s serving.”

“So why is he still alive?” What she wanted to say and did not was, so you’ll kill our C.O. over a can of beans but not some random murderer? Because she’d spent the last month fighting everyone around her, without cessation, and she didn’t want another argument. Not right now.

Laine shifted, uncomfortable. “The things Aria does to her enemies are worse, and I don’t know why he’s working in her bar.”
“She scares you that much—”

“Afterlife isn’t just any club. It’s her home base. Everyone inside is someone she tacitly invited.” Laine drove back towards the main subject, more than usually troubled. “But it’s not just the poison. You’ve got orange light coming out of you all over. Not to mention the surgical scars.”

She scooped up the last of the eggs, not looking at him. “Some aspects of resurrection are less than delicate.”

“Resurrection.” His tone was dubious at best. Laine was accustomed to her bullshit. “You look like a fricking cyborg, Nath.”

It was the first time she considered herself in that light, and her revulsion was immediate. “I don’t like that word.”

He plodded on, inexorable. “You get more of that sort of thing out here, but I don’t know any self-mods that cure dead.”

“If we’re going to get into this, I need a drink.” Shepard went to Laine’s fridge.

For a second it seemed he might stop her, point out she’d spent the last few days almost dying, but he held his peace. “I’ve got some vodka in the freezer.”

“Thanks.” As she pulled it out, Laine collected a pair of glasses from the dish-drying towel and set them on the counter. She poured.

Laine took a drink and then jutted the glass at her. “Let’s have it.”

Shepard tendered him an exhausted look, and opened the freezer again. “Do you have a spoon?”

He sighed, and extracted one from a drawer. “You always did hate vodka straight.”

She pulled out a carton of chocolate ice cream, scraped off the crust of ice crystals, plopped several spoonfuls into her vodka, and took a sip. “The ship came under attack. Not by geth.”

*Fire exploding through the walls. The ceiling of the CIC open to the stars, the staff blown out with it. Bakari lying trapped, dead, under a collapsed bulkhead. Floating in the black with her air hissing out…*

Shepard stirred her drink and scooped up some of the separating chocolate. She licked the spoon. “I got blown out by the explosion. Two years later, I woke up on a slab aboard a Cerberus station.”

“Cerberus?” he asked, blankly.

Sometimes Shepard had to remind herself that prior to investigating Saren, she was just as clueless. Cerberus was one of the Alliance’s better-kept secrets. The claimed they didn’t want to give Cerberus publicity, but Shepard suspected it was more about saving face. Cerberus had repeatedly poached from their ranks and infiltrated their programs. “They’re bad news. Long story, for another time.”

Laine processed that. “I don’t understand. Vacuum exposure put you in some kind of freak suspension? Or did this Cerberus attack your ship?”

“None of the above.” She ate another spoonful. “Far as I can tell, they just kept running medical experiments until the lights came back on.”
“Fuck.” He reached towards her. “Bo, look—”

She evaded him. Maybe dying should have changed things, but she couldn’t let their history go. Not completely. Not enough to accept that kind of comfort. She bit back several choice remarks, silent for long moments, aware of him watching her. Finally, she said, “Why did you save me?”

His anger was instantaneous. “Are you seriously asking why I didn’t let the poison kill you?”

Only a distinct effort of sheer will kept her voice flat. “You’ve been furious with me for years.”

“That’s you, not me.” Laine slammed his fist on the counter. The dishes jumped. “Shit, how many times do I have to apologize before you bury the damn hatchet?”

She set down the drink. “I can’t look at you, even now, even after all this time, without seeing you pull that trigger and the back of Chahine’s head explode. I doubt I’ll ever be able to see anything else.”

“We were starving. Chahine had the food under lock and key.” He shook his head, the same disbelief as always. “You didn’t even like her.”

“What does it matter if I liked her?”

“There were reasons you didn’t like her. Like maybe if she hadn’t led us straight into deep shit, the mission wouldn’t have gone south, and the barians wouldn’t have damaged our drive core.”

Shepard was incredulous. “You can’t possibly blame her for them attacking our ship and stranding us for months.”

“We only had food for a few weeks. I was hungry, Nath.”

She remembered it very well. “I’m so tired of hearing how hungry you were, and what an excuse that is for murder.”

“It’s not—” He shook his head. “You’ve never understood this, ok? You don’t have that fear.”

That just left her puzzled, confusion eroding her anger by inches. “What fear?”

“Look, I’ve known you a long-ass time now. I’ve seen you look death in the face and it doesn’t faze you. You don’t have that primal fear of no longer existing. So you don’t understand this.”

He took a breath. “Maybe that’s why you’re a spectre and the rest of us aren’t. I don’t know.”

The suggestion was ridiculous. “Rag, I didn’t throw my life away on the _Normandy_ if that’s what you’re saying. I wanted to live.”

“A survival instinct isn’t the same as fear.” He ran his hand over his hair. “I’m saying I was so hungry I thought I was dying. _I was_ dying, slowly. You think I decided to kill her? It just happened. I was shocked as anyone afterwards. It’s not an excuse.”

It felt pathetic that she actually believed him. She’d seen his face when it happened. Shepard looked at him, then into her glass, and then drained the last of her alcoholic milkshake and set it aside.

When it became clear that was the full extent of her response, Laine snapped. “Why were you even on the ship when it blew? Lieutenant Wonderful just leave you to die?”

Shepard’s arm twitched. Just once, but with enough force and intent that Laine slid sideways on
pure instinctual defense. Shepard closed her eyes and fought her temper down with a deep breath. “He begged me to leave. I promised him I would, and then I didn’t. What the hell do you expect me to say about it?”

Laine looked at her. Then he knocked back his own drink, wiped his mouth, and made a show of rinsing the glass, taking his time about it. “Sounds like you. Props to him, though, for figuring you out that well in what, six months?”

That irked her. “I’ve already told you once, I didn’t die on purpose. I’ve never been like that.”

“Sure, but telling yourself ‘just one more person’ amounts to the same thing, pragmatically.” He shook his head. “Maybe that’s your primal fear, right there. Letting people down.”

That hit a nerve and set it twanging. She left the SR-2 in Miranda’s capable hands. The crew would be fine.

But half that crew was there for her, for their mission, not Cerberus.

Laine shut off the water and stared into the sink, bringing his own temper down. “Bo, how did you end up drinking alone on Omega?”

“See, now we do have to talk about Cerberus.” She put more ice cream in her glass, without the vodka this time. “They’re a terrorist group promoting human supremacy. They killed Admiral Kahoku and his men. I raided one of their labs towards the end of the war, and the things we found there...”

She trailed off. Laine turned around, disturbed. They’d seen any number of horrors the galaxy could dish out, together, and he knew what it took to rock her.

“And there’s more where that came from.” She stirred the ice cream, watching it melt, pointedly and deliberately conversational. “But the one that stuck with me is they lured thresher maws to the colony on Akuze and incidentally killed my platoon.”

He stared. “Akuze wasn’t an accident? It was an attack?”

“Yeah.” She ate some ice cream and sucked the residue off the spoon, slowly. She found she couldn’t look at him. She couldn’t look at anything. “The worst of it is the Alliance knew all along. They thought it was more important to chase a chance to track Cerberus infiltration than get justice for the dead.”

It was Laine’s turn to pause. He started to speak, thought better of it, and then said, “And Cerberus brought you back?”

Shepard abruptly set the glass back down and left the kitchen. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

He followed her. “Nathaly, this is important.”

She went to his table and started sorting out her armor from his. “They kept me in a lab for two years like I was an amoeba or a chimpanzee or something. It’s my life, Rag.”

Shepard could feel him staring at her with growing irritation, and chose to ignore that too. She started to reset her biomonitoring unit, her last potential link to Cerberus. Her omni-tool was already wiped clean of any connection to their systems.
“Ok.” Laine fell heavily into the chair beside her, legs akimbo, and folded his arms. “Shit, but you never get any easier, do you?”

“It’s part of my charm,” she answered, an old joke, but it fell slightly flat. She cleared her throat and tried to expand a little. Because he had just saved her life, and because he was probably right about the rest of it, too. “Cerberus installed me in a copy ship. Stolen Alliance schematics, I guess. Even hired some of the surviving crew to make me feel right at home.”

“That’s creepy as hell.”

A fierce gratitude rose in her, and left her a little lightheaded. She’d started to think she was crazy for not liking it. God knew Joker loved the new ship. “They wanted me to investigate the missing colonies. Just about the only thing we could agree on.”

“It’s been driving me up the wall, not being able to do anything about that. I make pretty good money out here, but not ‘investigate a staggering act of war all on my own’ good. And nobody I’ve found is willing to pay for someone to do it. Except Cerberus, I guess.”

“Guess so.” She sat and sighed, running her hand through her still-damp hair. “I’m not in a good position myself. But I’ll figure something out.”

“There’s got to be other people out there willing to help.” But he sounded dubious at best.

She made a face, acknowledging the difficulty of the task, but then she had another idea. “Cerberus had a few recruits picked out. One of them is here on Omega. A gang leader called Archangel?”

“Archangel?” Laine was caught off guard. “Not sure that’s how I’d characterize him.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “You know him?”

He shook his head, no. “He’s even newer to this rock than I am. Turian tourist from Council space.”

“Tourist?”

“Some people treat Omega like a theme park. There’s no law here, so people can live out whatever fantasy’s been rattling around in their head. Archangel wants to be Batman.” Laine shrugged. “That said, from what I hear he can handle himself better than most who try. He did well enough with the whole vigilante justice shtick to attract all the wrong attention.”

“He wants to fix Omega?” That was a daunting challenge even by her standards. “Bet that went over well with the locals.”

“I doubt the people he helps complain, but plenty of residents who lead perfectly inoffensive lives came here because they don’t like the idea of being accountable to anyone. Much less some guy going around under an alias and passing violent judgment on their neighbors.”

“Cerberus’ dossier indicated he works with a team. Guess he convinced at least a few others to see his point of view.” Shepard didn’t know enough yet to say how she felt about any of it, but she was intrigued enough to pursue a conversation. Vigilantes ran the gambit from ordinary folk who’d simply had enough to narrow-minded narcissists. Impossible to say where Archangel fell. “But on the upside, I doubt he’ll care much that I can’t pay him whatever Cerberus planned to offer.”
“He’s a little hard to find.” Laine likewise began collecting his gear. “But he’s pissed off every merc gang on this station. He can’t hide from that forever.”

She glanced at him as she turned her inner suit right-side out. Laine had washed the neoprene, at least—an unexpected gesture. “I’m listening.”

“Dude’s got them scared. He’s had them waking up at night for months, feeling a knife at their throats. Not just the grunts—the leadership. They tracked him to his home base and they want to go in with overwhelming force.” He shrugged. “But, they’re also sick of losing guys. So that means a load of freelancers.”

“They recruited you.”

“They tried. It’s a bit beneath my skills. Personally, I think most of those dumbasses are going to end up dead, because angry frightened merc leaders don’t think that clearly. But I bet the offer’s still open.”

Understanding dawned. “Go in with the other freelancers, and look for a chance to make contact with Archangel.”

He nodded. “It’s risky. If the mercs catch on, they’ll make examples of us.”

“They can try.” Shepard cocked her head. “You up for this? It’s not exactly your fight. And it’s not likely we’ll get paid.”

“When have I ever needed money to take a front-row seat to your crazy?”

The corner of her mouth turned up in a lopsided smile. “What are we waiting for?”

Laine led them to the recruitment station, in a run-down rented storefront not far from Omega’s downtown. A batarian in a Blue Suns hardsuit handled the queue. Any number of freelancers hung around the counter, checking gear, reading contracts, and swapping odds. Shepard was inclined to agree with Rag’s assessment. This wasn’t a job she’d want, in ordinary circumstances. There was a tension between the reps and the freelancers that spoke to a toxic undercurrent of bad blood.

As they waited, Shepard asked Laine in an undertone, “I see Blue Suns. What about the others?”

“Suns are the largest. Probably the most professional.” He chewed his lip. “They’re traditional, skill-wise. Balanced. Blood Pack’s full of krogan and vorcha, and they rely on muscle. Eclipse favors finesse and packs their infantry with mechs. They all hate each other.”

“And Archangel’s company?”

“Not sure you’d call them a merc outfit. He doesn’t work for hire. He just screws with the big three at every possible opportunity. Steals shipments, ambushes meetings. Rumor has it he went after some of the command personally.”

They reached the head of the line. The batarian recruiter stared pointedly at Laine. “Guess you weren’t too good for us after all.”

“Her idea.” Laine jerked his thumb at Shepard. “I learned a long time ago not to argue.”

His mouth quirked as he turned to Shepard. “Club recruitment’s two shops over. Don’t think you’ve got the looks for stripping, but someone’s always desperate.”
“I’ve got bigger dicks than yours hanging in my trophy room,” Shepard said, conversational, no hint of a boast or threat. “Some people like to harvest with a knife, but I find a good twist and yank makes for a nicer display piece.”

She curled her fingers together as if gripping something, and gave her wrist a sharp flick. The complete nonchalance of the gesture made the mostly-male freelancers standing nearest to their group take a healthy step back.

The batarian blanched. Shepard offered him a polite smile, showing teeth. He was suddenly all business. “How many signing up?”

“Just us two.” She crossed her arms. “Terms?”

“500 hundred credits paid on completion. That’s per individual still standing, not a flat thousand for your team.” He forked over a datapad with the contract. “No compensation for wear and tear on gear, and no, this contract is not an invitation to join the Blue Suns, Eclipse, or Blood Pack. Do the job, get paid, and we’re quits.”

Shepard skimmed the contract. Since she wasn’t planning on seeing that deposit anyway, it didn’t hold much weight, but it never hurt to check for landmines. “Where do we meet up with your people?”

“Got a transport waiting at Garage 17.” He leaned forward, heavily. “Been ferrying freelancers out for three days.”

She bent over the counter to sign with her fingertip. “This is a lot of trouble for one guy.”

“He had a whole team, but we’ve dealt with them already. Now he’s holed up in his base of operations. He’s got all the terrain advantages, but we’ve got a plan to break through.”

That was when Shepard knew all the freelancers dumb or desperate enough to buy into this contract were going to come out corpses. Any person who could stand up to a small army alone for this long had more than a vague terrain advantage—they had a real bottleneck, and hell of a lot of experience. The freelancers were here to run Archangel out of energy or ammo, and then the bonded mercs would swoop in and clean up.

But she kept her tone light as she handed back the datapad. “Always up for a good fight.”

“Right.” He looked over her shoulder. “Next!”

Shepard turned to go, and came face to face with a teenaged kid. No armor, no real weapons, just a shitty third-hand pistol designed for personal protection, not a real fight.

Laine seemed to have similar thoughts. “You’re a little young for a freelancer.”

The kid was insulted. “I grew up on Omega. I can handle myself.”

They exchanged a glance. Laine tried reason. “Look, I wouldn’t trust that gun to hold together for more than a few shots.”

His face colored. He drew it from where it sat hooked through his belt, and held it out. “This thing’s worth fifty credits—”

Shepard took a more direct approach. Seizing the gun over the kid’s protests, she instantly recognized the older design, popped the cooling chamber, and smashed the thin heat pipe with her
The gun sparked and died, alert lights fading, trigger unresponsive. With no way to cool itself, the pistol couldn’t fire, and the coolant now leaking into the electronics would make it difficult to repair.

The kid’s mouth hung open. She handed it back, grip-first, and gave him a friendly smile. “You’ll thank me one day.”

They left him spluttering curses. Laine glanced at her. “Nice to see you’ve still got your gooey center.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He went uncharacteristically quiet. More seriously, without any hint of a tease, he said, “You just walked off your ship?”

“Not my ship.”

“But you were in command.”

“In name only. Cerberus had plenty of insurance.” But again she felt that twinge of guilt. She’d been so focused on her need to get out from under the Illusive Man’s thumb, and away from the experimental horror of her situation, that she hadn’t spared a thought for the crew’s reaction.

She told herself they’d be fine. Miranda was a competent leader. But it was a stretch to imagine Joker or Chakwas happy under her lead, or the ex-Alliance engineers. Kelly would probably wilt like a daisy in a flamethrower the first time Miranda frowned her way.

Laine watched her as they walked to the garage. He’d fought beside her in all kinds of situations for ten years. She was an open book to him, and she hated it. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Then stop acting like that.”

She made a sound of exasperation. “Like what?”

“Like any question about the past two years is a personal attack.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

The merc’s transport took them across Omega’s dizzying labyrinth of neighborhoods and industries. Shepard tried to follow their flight path, figure out where they were going or at least how to return, but soon gave it up as a hopeless effort.

They set down in an abandoned street. Aboard an asteroid station, built for a world of flying cars, streets followed the softest seams of rock, turning at odd angles and incorporating staircases to navigate steep shifts in topography. Another batarian Suns merc sat on the steps. He got to his feet as Shepard and Laine climbed out of the truck.

His eyes passed over them, sizing up their potential. “About time they sent me someone who can actually fight.”

The gesture that accompanied “someone” indicated a person of the lowest caste of batarian society, not an outsider. More of an insult than indicating an outsider would have been— even slaves were a cut above those batarians considered utterly useless. The merc was frustrated.

“The recruiter was a little vague on why you’re hiring so many freelancers,” Shepard said. She
stuck to English. There was no reason to tip her hand.

“I’ll bet.” He snorted. “Archangel’s across an exposed bridge at the end of the boulevard just ahead, perched in a balcony with a sniper rifle. Only way in that Archangel didn’t destroy. It’s a killing field, but he’s getting tired. It’ll be over soon.”

“And the latest crop of hires?”

“You’ll be distraction, while an infiltration team sneaks in behind Archangel’s position.”

Laine crossed his arms. “Sounds like a suicide run.”

“You look like you can handle it.” The batarian shrugged. “The infiltration team’s stuck inside. Managed to secure a position while my boss, Tarak, kept Archangel busy with his gunship. But Archangel somehow shot it down before our guys could reach him. So you don’t have to hold out long. Just long enough for them to complete their task.”

Shepard checked her rifle. “When do we go?”

“Soon as Sergeant Cathka gives the signal.” He put his hand to his ear, as he received an incoming transmission. “Go on ahead.”

They started down the road. Nervous mercenaries, freelance and bonded alike, crowded against the buildings. Some chatted quietly while others buried their apprehensions in a growing pile of cigarettes. Shepard tried to ignore the scent of their smoke, the way it made her salivate.

The way the mercs clung to the wall confused her, until one tried to move across the boulevard, and went down with a bullet through his head. The freelancers barely stirred. One near Shepard muttered about the dead man’s sloppiness. She peered ahead, but couldn’t make out the sniper’s position.

Laine finished his own evaluation. “That’s a hell of a shot.”

Shepard entered an alcove, out of easy eavesdropping range. “He’s still just one guy, and we’re going in with a lot of mercs.”

Laine concurred. “Surviving the bridge won’t be terribly difficult, in a group this size, with superior equipment. If Archangel’s blocked all the other routes, getting out could be a nightmare.”

“We need to even the odds in case we have to fight our way out.” Shepard glanced around the staging area. “We should split up. See if we can’t find some gear to sabotage. Mechs, heavy arms, anything that isn’t under close watch.”

“Sounds good. I’ll find you when they give the signal.”

Shepard watched him disappear into a side street, following the flow of people, and then took off herself, searching for the leadership.

Her lack of a merc uniform earned a few raised eyebrows and disdainful looks, but nobody stopped her. It seemed the principle of acting with purpose applied just as well to Omega as in civilized space. Not one person questioned her right to be here, no matter where she went.

Eventually, she found the war room. Members of all three merc groups, leaders judging by the deference on display, stood around a table cluttered with charts and datapads. Various assistants and advisors crowded the walls. Shepard slipped in unnoticed and stood near the door, listening.
“You all agreed to do this my way,” the Blue Suns leader growled. He was stocky even for a batarian, and older than Shepard expected. Tarak, presumably. “We send the freelancers first.”

“They’ll lose their nerve.” The krogan leader of the Blood Pack snorted. He wore that peculiar krogan brand of indifference, a conviction he was right paired with an unwillingness to stop the others from proving it.

The third man, the salarian Eclipse leader, agreed. “Garm is right. We can’t trust them. Eclipse mechs can—”

“Enough, Jaroth!” Tarak thumped the table. “I’m tired of losing men. I’m tired of losing assets. I’m tired of every damn job we run turning into a trap thanks to one turian vigilante with a burr in craw about our business interests.”

“Don’t underestimate him.” Jaroth’s inner lids flicked over his eyes. “Archangel is smart, resourceful, and dangerous. Not to mention prudent. His own team didn’t know who he is.”

Garm growled. “I don’t care who he is. Sure, he’s brave, until he loses the upper hand. He came at me while I was asleep, and I still held him off, alone. Which is more than either of you can say.”

Jaroth leveled the kind of look that made Shepard doubt Garm’s life expectancy, once this was over. “Archangel killed my brother in an ambush. I know you’re not suggesting he was weak.”

“And he came for me in my home,” Tarak interrupted. “He’s hit all of us where it hurts. So we took his team, we took back his territory, and now we take him.”

A human woman standing near Tarak’s elbow, also in a Suns hardsuit, spoke up. “Archangel’s held out over a day. If we go in together—”

Tarak’s eyes burned. “When I want your counsel, Jentha, I ask for it.”

A flash of anger crossed her face, but she shut her mouth. So Shepard decided to speak up. The mercenaries would be stronger as a combined force, and she figured hearing the same idea from a hated freelancer would ensure Tarak didn’t take the advice. “I heard this was a joint operation, but all I see is three cooks squabbling over one pot.”

She put all the drawling condescension she could muster into her voice. It worked. Tarak pointed a finger at her like a pistol muzzle. “Get this freelancer out of here.”

“I don’t go into situations with a hidden playbook,” she said flatly. “And from what I’ve seen, you’re not in a position to turn down experienced help. Most of your hires won’t last five seconds on that bridge.”

A vein bulged on his forehead. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Someone who values her skin.”

The woman, Jentha, gave her a hard stare. Then she leaned forward and whispered urgently into Tarak’s ear. He scoffed, and Jentha gestured at Shepard more forcefully.

Shepard experienced that sinking feeling that went with being recognized in less than ideal circumstances, but didn’t let any of it show on her face.

Tarak straightened and narrowed all four of his eyes at her. “Why are you here?”
Shepard lifted her chin. “Let’s say I’m an interested party.”

He spoke evenly. “I don’t need some Citadel type fucking with my op.”

Jaroth’s inner eyelids flicked upwards. “Citadel type?”

“She’s a spectre,” Tarak spat.

A stir ran through the room. Garm spoke first, jerking his massive chin in her direction. “What’s your interest in this?”

“Archangel’s been screwing with my life recently, too.” It wasn’t far off the truth. Archangel took several potshots at her while she was exploring, bringing down her shields twice, and she was not looking forward to crossing that bridge. And she felt a touch of resentment that she had to go to this much trouble just to talk to him. She let the exasperation show on her face. “Can’t put a value in credits on that.”

Tarak’s hackles settled a bit. “The plan’s set. I’m not going to move everything around at the last second to appease some talented nobody who shows up on my station.”

Shepard took note of his phrasing. From what she gleaned of Aria’s reputation, she wouldn’t tolerate even casual declarations like that, not from anyone with a real power base. And whatever her personal feelings about the Queen of Omega, she never doubted her ability to enforce her rule.

Meanwhile, Tarak turned back to the plan, looking at each of the other merc leaders in turn. “Let Archangel mow down the freelancers and buy time for the infiltration team. If that doesn’t work, you’ll get your shot.”

“I’ll have my mechs standing by after the freelancers are through.” Jaroth wore a thin, mean smile. “Heavy included.”

“I’ve got squads of vorcha ready to go once we’ve got those lower tunnels blasted open.” Garm rolled his shoulder. “Then we’ll charge from the front.”

Tarak glanced at Jentha. “Gunship repairs?”

“Cathka’s still working on it. He’ll have it ready in time.”

“You won’t need it,” Garm said. “I’ll be the one to take that bastard out. Your Suns can watch and learn.”

Apparently, Tarak was familiar with krogan hot air, because he ignored that comment altogether. “We go on the infiltration team’s signal.”

Shepard took that as her cue to leave, as quietly as she came. She and Laine would have to kill every last one of them to get out. If Archangel had any escape route, he would have used it by now. She’d lived through heavily one-sided conflicts, missions that kept her on her feet for days, because the only alternative was death. Nobody chose that if they had other options.

She had to even the odds.

Laine waited just off the boulevard, out of line of sight of Archangel. He was exercising his arm, curling it slowly and feeling along the limb.

Shepard drew up beside him. “He tagged you too, huh?”
Laine muttered a curse. “And there’s more bad news. Eclipse has top-of-the-line mechs. They’re going through shake-out now.”

The best mechs were almost as good as live soldiers, and as well-equipped. Shepard’s heart sank.

Laine went on, “I did what I could to screw with their algorithms, but I’ve never been a tech guy. And these were manufactured inside the Salarian Union. So doubly unfamiliar.”

Shepard felt a moment’s regret that she’d left Mordin on the *Normandy*, followed by more of that creeping guilt she did her best to shake off. “I invited myself to a strategy session and overheard their plan.”

“They just let you in?”

“You’re surprised that mercs working station-side don’t have the best operational security?” Shepard raised an eyebrow. “These guys can’t work together to save their lives. They’re going in sequentially. We can handle that, probably. But they’ve also got limited air support. A gunship.”

“That’s going to really limit options for maintaining the bottleneck.”

“I can disable a gunship,” Shepard said. “Get ready. This thing could launch at any time.”

She picked her way across the boulevard, wary of Archangel’s sniper prowess. His motives remained unclear. Though nobody said it outright, his goal to overturn the merc hierarchy appeared grounded in altruism. A real life Robin Hood, though Robin Hood came to hate corrupt authorities more than he loved the downtrodden, and Shepard had to wonder whether Archangel felt the same. Especially after the murder of his own team.

If that were true, Shepard was deeply concerned Archangel might not want to leave. If she’d faced Cerberus directly after Akuze, she’d have died before she let a single one of them live.

And now, she was using their information to help her mission. She still didn’t fully understand why Cerberus cared about the Terminus colonies, but doubted their motives were purely benevolent. The taste of her mouth turned bitter. Maybe, deep down, she knew she didn’t deserve to go home, not while she owed Cerberus her life. Not while her platoon lay in the ground.

Though Archangel shot at her several times, he was getting predictable. She kept in motion, close to the ground, and none of them hit.

Yet another batarian Blue Suns merc bent over a gunship, an arc welder in his hand, his hardsuit visor darkened to protect his eyes. She raised her voice over the sound. “Cathka?”

He straightened without particular haste, and tapped the visor twice to remove the opacity. “Sergeant Cathka.”

Cathka set down the welder and palmed a pack of cigarettes, lighting up. Shepard tried not to drool. He let out a stream of smoke. “And no, I don’t know when we’re going. Only it’ll be soon.”

She didn’t glance at the gunship. She had to get Cathka out of here, and undue interest would only make him suspicious. “I haven’t smelled tobacco that good in damn near ten years.”

Batarians made the best cigarettes in the galaxy, and Hegemony ground forces smoked like chimneys. On Aonia, marines used to joke they could smell when a patrol was coming by setting position downwind. Economic sanctions meant opportunities to obtain them were few and far
“Tobacco?” Cathka asked.


“Ah.” He sized her up. “You were Alliance.”

“Half your human freelancers started in the Alliance,” she replied, evenly.

“Sure, but you’re not shitting yourself like they are.” He tapped the pack and held it out to her. She tilted her head, questioning. Cathka shrugged. “I’m an Omega native. What do I care who the Hegemony fights?”

She shouldn’t. She knew she shouldn’t. Her mom was right, this habit was pointless and wasteful, and she had a golden opportunity to let it go.

But wouldn’t this be easier if she could relax Cathka with a little camaraderie, make him less suspicious? Wouldn’t it be rude to turn him down?

“Thanks.” She accepted his light as well, and spared a few seconds to appreciate the cigarette properly, rolling the taste over her tongue. Long absence transformed it to ambrosia; she could have melted into a puddle, just then. She exhaled. “That bridge is a nasty piece of business.”

Cathka seemed to approve of her obvious enjoyment, and stuffed the pack back into a pouch. “You don’t have to get across. Just keep Archangel busy.”

“While the infiltration team does what, exactly?” She inhaled again. Her attention was only half on the conversation, the rest distracted by the cigarette, woodsy and spicy and smooth like good scotch, the tingle of nicotine hitting her blood.

“They’ve got two options.” He tapped off his ash. “Trap him in close quarters, and finish the bastard off face-to-face. Failing that, explosives. Just need time to set them up.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Shepard wanted to cover all her bases while Cathka was in a chatty mood.

“Well, first off, Tarak will kill any freelancer left alive. Penalty for failure. After that—” He paused abruptly, putting two fingers to his ear. “Check. Bravo team—you are go!”

Shepard glanced over her shoulder as a mass of freelancers rushed towards the barricade guarding the bridge, Laine among them. Then she looked back at Cathka. She was out of time.

So was he. “Better run if you want your credits. And I’ve got to get this bird flying or Tarak’ll have my ass.”

He opaqued his visor once more, and went back to the gunship, inspecting his last seam.

Shepard’s eyes found the arc welder. It was still hot. She picked it up and sauntered after him. Cathka had just started to turn towards her, his stance a mess of confusion, when she jammed it into the recirculation unit on his back and pressed the button. He let out a scream, flailing so hard it yanked the welder from her hand. She let him collapse to the floor. Still breathing, but out of it.

Then she bent and retrieved his pack of cigarettes. “Thanks for the smoke.”

A quick glance at the gunship told her the repairs were far from complete. Tarak would be lucky
to get it in the air. She could do more damage, but the clock was against her, and she needed to rejoin her team. Shepard made for the bridge, activating her comm. “Laine.”

“We’ve jumped down to the span,” he answered promptly. Shepard heard the staccato tempo of his rifle. “Where the hell are you?”

“Inbound.” She flicked away the last of the cigarette with real regret and hopped the barricade. There was no way to take cover during the maneuver, but she was still annoyed when her shields gave a tell-tale pop as a sniper round brought them down. She grit her teeth and scurried to a support column.

In those few seconds, she spotted Laine not far from her position, and moved up beside him. They took cover in the shelter of a column and made a rapid assessment of the battleground.

The building looked a lot less like a merc base, and a lot more like a large private residence, complete with spacious windows. Archangel sniped at them off the balcony. At the far end of the bridge, inside, she spied a staircase built into the wall. “Make for the stairs and regroup.”

Shepard darted out of cover and barreled up the bridge, moving in a zig-zag to confuse his aim. All around her, freelancers lay dead or dying, mowed down by Archangel. That kind of precision elevated him above even most sniper specialists, but his speed left Shepard speechless.

The remaining freelancers were completely uncoordinated, and starting to panic. Her shields went down again as she was hit by friendly fire from behind. “Shit—”

Shepard caught the glint of the sniper rifle, high on the balcony, just before a second round smacked into her suit and pinged off the ceramic plate, cracking it through. She sprinted and ducked behind a bookshelf, just inside the house. Her shoulder smarted.

Laine scuttled up beside her, firing back at the mercs. “You good?”

“I’ll live.” She rotated it a few times to be sure nothing was broken, completely pissed off. That shit would be expensive to replace, and her odds of living to replace it had just gone down.

Laine disappeared into the stairwell, and began firing back at the onslaught of mercenaries. Shepard made to join him. But then she was distracted.

To her right lay four body bags, the cheap foil kind that left little of their contents to the imagination. The dead came from several species. And they’d been here long enough for someone to care for the remains.

“Bo!” Laine called her back to the fight. She pursed her lips.

Shepard scooted around a couch, exposing her back to Archangel, and laid down cover fire for her squad. Hopefully Archangel would recognize help when he saw it. “We gotta get upstairs.”

“I’ll cover you.” Laine focused his fire on the doorway, allowing her to scramble up behind him. They intensified their onslaught.

The freelancers were just starting to figure it out. Their expressions shifted from fear to outright horror. A few tried to flee back to the barricade, only to be met by enraged Eclipse, queuing up for their own assault.

Shepard exchanged her heat sink and kept firing.
The freelancers were decimated. All that remained was mop-up, and the few left alive would be cautious. That gave her time for a quick conversation. She jerked her thumb towards the second floor. “Let’s go introduce ourselves. I’m sure Archangel’s curious.”

The upstairs consisted of two rooms, the larger of which was modified into a barracks. Bunkbeds crowded the far end, while several couches sat facing a vid terminal, and the walls were lined with bookshelves and supply caches. Real survivalist shit. Archangel himself remained at the balcony overlooking the bridge, tracking a target with his rifle, not stirring as they entered the room. His blue hardsuit obscured all identifying features; the helmet visor was opaque, and barely large enough to see out.

He fired, once, and then sagged against the balcony.

Shepard moved in with her gun aimed down, a gesture of friendly intent.

“Archangel?” she asked, the name silly in her mouth, but they didn’t have forever to sort this out.

Archangel hauled himself to his feet, moved to the couch, and sank into its depths. The rifle he leaned against the armrest. Then, at last, he removed his helmet.

Her mouth fell open. Beside her, Laine started in surprise, then cursed.

Garrus Vakarian, aka Archangel, stared up at her with the look of a man who hadn’t slept in days. “Shepard.”
Meet Archangel

August 2185

Garrus sank further into the cushions, with a flash of discomfort as stiff joints settled into new positions. “I thought you were dead.”

Shepard felt she’d just been socked in the gut. Laine found his voice first. “You’re that turian from the Terra Nova run.”

“Good times.” Garrus managed half a humorless smile. Between the sweat and grime, the face paint showing his colonial affiliation had faded into almost nothing.

She finally managed something. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Between the pair of us, I think you have the more interesting answer.”

“Collectors are attacking Terminus colonies.” She pursed her lips. “I hoped ‘Archangel’ could tell us something about how the Blue Suns are getting Collector technology. And maybe give me a hand.”

She couldn’t suppress the sarcastic emphasis on his nickname. He coughed. “Just something the locals came up with, for all my good deeds. Please, it’s just ‘Garrus’ to you. And that’s not a real answer.”

“The rest is…” Shepard waved vaguely at herself, at the room, at the whole rest of the universe, and sighed. “A really long story.”

“We don’t have much time for those right now.” He coughed again, and pulled a bottle of water from somewhere in the depths of the couch. After he drank, Garrus wiped his mouth. “My short story is I got fed up with C-Sec bureaucracy. I know you tried to change my mind about that, but turns out nothing changes. Not them, not me. Figured I could do more good out here. Cleaning up the streets, taking out the trash.”

She heard noise from downstairs. “Rag.”


Garrus grunted. “No surprise there.”

Shepard offered him a hand to haul him upright. Garrus stumbled over to the balcony, all but dead on his feet.

“We’re going to get you out of here.” She watched Laine shoot a freelancer who briefly leaned out of cover. The merc stumbled into the street and fell.

Her own shoulder still ached. “You nailed me pretty good, by the way.”

“You weren’t moving fast enough.” For a second, there was a hint of the old Garrus—the flash of a real smile, a gleam in his eye. Then the weariness returned. “I might know something about the Suns’ stranger transactions. We found a device in one of their caches, maybe some kind of communicator.”
“And you kept it?”

“I stashed it downstairs, away from people. Took a leaf out of your book.”

“You can’t think it’s reaper tech.” Back in ‘83, Shepard had been adamant about not allowing any reaper artifacts aboard ship, long before she knew what they were. They gave her a queasy, vaguely unsettled feeling, not something she could trust near her crew. After she’d seen a few in action, nothing could convince her it was worth the risk.

“I don’t know what the hell it is. Could be Collector. The Suns have been trading with them more lately. Could be anything.” He raised the rifle and looked down the sights again. “We’re not getting out the front. That bridge has saved my life, funneling those idiots into scope. But they’ll turn it against us if we try to leave.”

“So, what, we sit here and wait for death?”

“I held this position alone for almost two days. With three of us…” Garrus sucked his mandibles close to his jaw. “I say we watch for a hole in their offensive, and then make our move. Once we shake loose we can lose them in the back streets.”

Shepard’s mouth thinned, studying the dozens of mercs milling around across the bridge, waiting to advance. The odds against Garrus’ plan were terrible, but she had no better ideas. “We’ve got their basic plan. Eclipse and their mechs are up next.”

Garrus burst out laughing, with only the slightest tinge of hysteria. “I go to all this trouble to piss them off, and these guys still can’t work together?”

Apparently, he found the notion funny enough that he kept chuckling, here and there, dying into a wheeze. Shepard glanced at him sidelong. “Garrus, how the fuck did we end up facing the business end of an army? What happened here?”

His face lost all expression. He rubbed the flat plate that formed his turian nose. “I let my feelings get in the way of my judgment.” Garrus nodded towards the bridge. “Look. Scouts, maybe.”

He raised his rifle to take advantage of the scope, and then passed it to Shepard. She saw a mech enter the crosshairs. “Eclipse infantry, right on schedule.”

She squeezed the trigger. The mech exploded. “One less now.”

Shepard handed the gun back. Garrus resumed his position at the balcony, ready to fire. “Jaroth’s ranks are full of smugglers, so he doesn’t skimp on the protection. These mechs will put up a fight.”

“Laine did something to their targeting algorithms. That should help.” Shepard’s eyes scanned the available ground, searching for good vantage points. “I’m going to have look while we have some time.”

“Knock yourself out.” Garrus continued to stare across the bridge. She wondered when he last ate. His skin looked like old leather draped across a knobby frame.

The lower story of the house was open all the way to the roof, aside from an alcove behind the stairs. That would let them shoot anyone who made it over the bridge before they reached the staircase. Furniture, kitchen fixtures, and support columns provided ample cover. Assets, so long as the mercs stayed confined to the bridge and entryway. If they breached the house, they’d have the same advantage.
The mercs absolutely could not be allowed to breach the house.

Upstairs, the barracks overlooked the bridge from the front and the living room behind. Across the balcony, she could see into a back room, with more bookshelves and a larger bed. She found two more body bags there. Garrus’ team, or at least part of it, had died here.

All three main rooms—the downstairs, the back room, and the barracks—could be closed off with hatches, but shutting out the mercs would also seal in her squad, and they might have to move quickly. Two hatches along the perimeter were welded shut, one on the ground floor, and one in the back room. That was a potential problem she hoped would stay in its box. They still hadn’t seen any sign of the infiltration team.

Shepard took a breath. Any moment now, Eclipse would locate their nerve, and send the mechs in for a proper attack. She returned to Garrus and Laine. “We’ll make a stand at the balcony. Rag, if any get inside, head to the stairs and take them out.”

“Got it.” He readied his weapon.

Garrus climbed up on a heap of junk he’d assembled for a more comfortable view. Shepard switched to her own sniper rifle. Garrus’ months aboard Omega had honed his skill to an unnatural level, but she was no slouch herself. If they could take down the mechs’ shields, with luck Laine could hold them back with his assault rifle, keep them busy.

She took up station beside Garrus, and gave him the best smile she could muster. How long had he sat in this house, trading shots with the mercs, surrounded by the bodies of his men? “This is almost over.”

“Looks like it’s just getting started.” He shot the first mech to step onto the bridge.

“That’s how you know it’s almost over.” She followed suit, watching a mech collapse as its tin can head turned to shrapnel. “Because you’ve finally reached the toughest bit.”

He made no reply, except to keep firing. Shepard sighted on a new target and spoke as she worked. “Do you have their comms?”

“Yes.” Garrus wore a targeting visor, apparently integrated with his comm unit. He reached for the ear piece. “Let me patch you through.”

She listened for a moment. “Tarak’s threatening to string me up by my own entrails.”

“Sounds like the other captains are getting some amusement out of it.” Garrus cocked his head. “Jaroth just ordered the heavy mech into position.”

Laine looked up. “They only had one heavy, but it’s fully equipped.”

“Wonderful.” Shepard ejected her thermal clip. It melted a hole through the synthetic rug. “I hate these stupid things.”

Laine’s rifled barked. “Mechs inbound.”

It was all the three of them could do to keep up. It slowed the mechs’ advance, but more of them hopped the barricade with every passing moment. Her sniper rifle might be an incredible tool, but it had a voracious appetite for thermal clips. Her pouch of spares was already lighter than she liked. “Just how many clips did you have stockpiled in this place?”
“We were set for months,” Garrus answered, firing again. “Granted, that was before the past few days. We should have enough to hold out until our merc friends make a mistake.”

Eclipse soldiers began to follow behind the mechs. Shepard waited, impatient, for signs of Laine’s handiwork. But the mercs stayed out of their line of sight.

She missed her shot. The mech disappeared into the atrium, and she knew it wouldn’t be the only one. Just the first. “Mechs in the entryway!”

“I got it,” Laine said. He headed for the stairs, freeing a grenade as he jogged.

Shepard concentrated on the flesh-and-blood Eclipse. If they made the house, with mechs inside, all hell would break loose, and her team would become part of a three-way crossfire.

An explosion came from downstairs. Laine seemed to be keeping pace.

“There he is!” Garrus shifted his aim and fired at a lone salarian figure just peeking over the barricade. Jaroth ducked out of the way before he could do more than bring his shields down. But Jaroth accomplished his mission—a mobile crane swung into place, and dropped the heavy mech squarely in the middle of the bridge.

It unfolded its limbs and stood up straight, fixing its weapons on the house.

“Shit.” Shepard reached for her grenade launcher. “Heavy mech inbound!”


Garrus shot an Eclipse asari moments before she breached the entryway and moved out of sight. “Are you crazy?”

“It has to complete a threat evaluation.” Laine paused to fire. “Plenty of mercs closer than us. Let’s not get on its target list.”

Sure enough, slowly, the mech adjusted its aim—and fired a rocket into a pocket of Eclipse pressed against the wall. Chips of concrete spattered from the impact. Shepard felt the shockwave ride up through the building’s bones and her mouth stretched into a fierce smile. “You undersold it, Rag.”

He called back up. “I wasn’t sure it would work.”

Down below, with the heavy targeting anything that moved, the Eclipse assault disintegrated into chaos. Mechs turned to face the new foe, only to wind up shooting the heavy, each other, and living soldiers. The soldiers tried to gain cover, and shot indiscriminately at their own mechs. At the barricade, Jaroth was all but jumping up and down, livid even at this distance, and shouting something into his comm.

Garrus laughed. “Jaroth’s ordering his people to stop damaging company property.”

Shepard didn’t need the Eclipse comm channel to convey the replies that drifted through the window. Asari had no concept of hell, but cursing someone to eternal Apartness from the great whole came close. And for salarians, there was no greater insult than idiocy.

Jaroth was, in fact, so angry that he left himself in the open. His own mechs tore apart his shields. As he dove for cover, Garrus took aim, and nailed him between the eyes. Jaroth was dead before he hit the ground.
“I’ve been after that jackass for months,” Garrus stated, moving to the next target. “Shipping tainted eezo all over Citadel space. He got stupid after I took out a big shipment and killed his top lieutenant.”

The face of Dr. Saleon, another salarian they’d hunted down together, flashed through Shepard’s mind. Saleon was even worse news than Jaroth. But she’d argued continually with Garrus, before and after, about right way to do things, which decidedly wasn’t whatever the hell went on in this house. She replied cautiously. “Sounds like you had quite the op going here.”

“You told me two years ago that all we ever control is our own actions.” Garrus didn’t look at her. “So I took action.”

Laine came back up the stairs, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and crouched down beside them to change his thermal clip. “Still got a heavy mech to deal with. It’s almost out of bastards to shoot that aren’t us.”

She watched it fire another rocket. The house shook. “Can we stun it?”

“Give me a moment,” said Garrus. Shepard readied her grenade launcher. Twenty seconds later, a shower of sparks erupted from the mech. She wasted no time firing.

The grenade left the tube with a hollow ker-thunk. Her eyes traced its trajectory. It fell upon the mech and exploded, rocking the several tons of metal back on its heels. Her squad pounded it with their smaller arms. It struggled to regain its bearings, not knowing where to fire, its sensors and mechanisms in disarray.

Shepard popped off another grenade. This time, when it struck, the mech exploded with it. She ducked behind the wall to shield her face from the cloud of shrapnel. Then it got very quiet.

She leaned against the balcony and closed her eyes. “Status.”

Laine got up and looked down into the living room. “Main level clear.”

“Bridge is clear,” Garrus said.

They got through round one with no injuries, and their ammo stockpile intact. Better than she hoped. She pushed imaginary hair out of her eyes, a gesture she couldn’t seem to stop repeating regardless of how long she lived with this horror of a haircut. “One merc group down. Blood Pack’s up next.”

“They’re not sending anyone across.” Garrus frowned. “Hesitation isn’t part of the krogan temperament. Much less Blood Pack’s.”

“You know Garm?”

“Thick-headed son of a bitch. Blood Pack aren’t hired for their brains. But he knows how to fight. Fast, too.” His mandible twitched, frustrated. “Almost had him once, but his vorcha showed up, and I had to let him go.”

Laine watched his face. “You’re not the first person to let Omega get under their skin. Wouldn’t be the first person to die for it, either. You can’t fix Omega.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Garrus growled.

“Is that what this was about?” Shepard asked. “The turian sheriff up against the outlaws of the
wild west?"

Garrus shook his head. “I don’t even know what that means.”

She didn’t push it. They were still in danger, and between Garrus’ exhaustion and those body bags, she wagered her friend was one bad splash of solvent away from losing his last veneer of sanity. Get him out of here in one piece, and she could rip his head off later.

The floor began to shake again. A deep, sustained rumble came up from below, and throughout the house, alarms began to blare. Garrus opened his omni-tool. “They’ve broken through the basement tunnels.”

Shepard looked across the bridge and swore. “There’s a pack of vorcha and krogan swarming the barricade.”

Laine glanced at Garrus. “What’s in the basement?”

“Warrens.” He leaned on his rifle and gave himself a shake. “Old passages to nearby buildings. We used them to move supplies.”

“We split up,” Shepard said immediately. “I’ll go below. You and Laine stay here and hold them off.”

Garrus was already shaking his head. “I’ve got the bridge to help me. You’ll need backup. There’s nothing down there but packages.”

“I won’t leave you alone—”

“I’ll hold the damn house,” he said, harsher than he meant. He jerked his head at the stairs. “I’ve got explosives packed in a crate near the door. Detonators on the shelf nearby.” He coughed, and reached for more water, splashing some of it over his face. “Seal those passageways. Bring it down on their heads.”

Shepard chewed her lip, liking nothing about it, but aware they had no time to argue. “They’ll blast through again. But it might buy us enough time to get out of here. Let’s go.”

“Wait. That device— it’s down there, in the storeroom.” Garrus gripped her shoulder a moment. “Spirits go with you.”

It was unlike him to be sentimental or superstitious. Her personal concern ratcheted up another notch, but there just wasn’t any time.

The hatch to the basement was tucked behind the staircase, wedged in among yet more shelves. They grabbed the munitions and divided them between themselves. Garrus unlocked the door remotely just as they arrived.

“Up ahead,” said Laine, gesturing with his rifle.

Three hallways ran off in different directions. The center was the shortest. Vorcha barreled down its length, screaming threats and firing indiscriminately.

Shepard’s lip curled. She raised her weapon, and took them out at the knees. “We need to get deeper into the tunnel to avoid collapsing the house.”

“Not like you to be careful,” Laine remarked, firing as another squad approached.
“It’s Garrus.” She killed another vorcha, and then the one behind him. “We have our issues, but you have no idea what we went through chasing Saren. I can’t let him die here.”

For a moment, she thought he might protest that he’d been on some challenging missions himself, but he took in her face in a quick glance and swallowed it. “He won’t.”

Shepard raised her gun as another squad of vorcha approached. “Clear the way and the get the hell out.”

There was absolutely nothing to use for cover. She sprayed bullets down the hall, same as the vorcha, hoping to take out or panic enough of them to let her squad break through. Laine aimed his gun at an angle to Shepard’s, creating a deadly crossfire, and slowly they advanced. But it was overwhelmingly luck. She would have given anything just then for just a few more people. Just one biotic would make short work of this kind of field, give them the control they needed.

But she’d voluntarily left the only support she had back on Korlus.

They got to an arch in the passage, some kind of foundational break. “This should be far enough.”

“I’ll cover you.” Laine stepped ahead.

She started slapping bricks of explosive to the wall, shoving the detonator into the paste with the heel of her palm. “Ten seconds!”

They turned and ran. Shepard prayed their shields would hold. Beside her, Laine let off a string of incendiary curses, and picked up speed with every step. Vorcha shrieked behind them. Then their screams abruptly died in a titanic crash of broken concrete and rent metal.

Simple pleasures, Shepard thought, as the detonation brought down the ceiling in a cloud of dust, a rumble of broken concrete, and a pulpy sound of crushed bodies. Corpses littered the tunnel. More vorcha shrieks could be heard down the other two hallways.

Over the comm, Garrus panted. “They’ve breached the house. Moving to the back room.”

“We need to hurry,” Shepard said. “You take the right passage. I’ve got the left.”

He opened his mouth. She was ready to scream. “No arguments!”

She took off down her tunnel, and called over her shoulder. “Grab that Collector piece of shit if you see it, but don’t waste time.”

“Copy that,” Laine said, tipping his gun to her before sprinting off to the right.

Shepard turned and stared down the length of her target.

Garrus or someone had erected barricades as far down the tunnel as she could see, up to a right angle turn. They reached her waist, easy to jump, but hard to see over. Anything could be hiding behind them. And they’d slow her down. Cover worked both ways, and she’d be exposed as she advanced, while the Blood Pack shot at them from relative safety.

“Crap.” She ran her fingers through her hair, and started to move.

A pair of vorcha sprang over the nearest barricade. Shepard shot one dead before it scrambled over the next barricade, then barreled ahead.

She slammed into the first barricade and hunkered down, just in time to avoid a jet of fire as it
poured over her head. Shepard let out a sigh of exasperation. “They have a flamethrower.”

She popped up, and fired. Her target fell backwards and the flame thrower flew up out of his hands, spinning like a Catherine wheel. Shepard hit the deck, but it still singed her cheek.

There wasn’t a moment to worry about it. Shepard spun and shot over the barricade, nailing a vorcha about to drop onto her head.

She pressed her advantage, vaulting the barricade and speeding to the next. In those few seconds, three vorcha materialized at the bend. Her shields went down in a hailstorm of bullets. She covered her head with her arms and slid into cover as a pair of bullets pinged off the ceramic plating over her bicep. They were good shots, for vorcha. Shepard put it down to luck.

Over the radio, as she crawled towards cover, Laine shouted over gunfire. “Some kind of warehouse. They ambushed me. Not just vorcha. Krogan and varren.”

“Little busy here.” Shepard leveled her gun atop the barricade and letting off three bursts before the vorcha forced her back.

“I got caught in a shotgun blast.” Laine paused to exchange fire, panting slightly. “Still upright but it’s going to take longer than we thought.”

“Roger,” Shepard said, and then she had no concentration to spare for the other half of her squad. Another pyro had entered the field. She grit her teeth. “Oh, no you don’t.”

Before it could aim, she leapt the barricade, and barreled straight for the flamethrower, her only objective to gain control of the weapon. The two conventionally-armed vorcha crouched behind it barely had time to register her entrance. The one with the kerosene tried to ignite its flame, but fumbled as the heel of her boot collided with his gut. The vorcha folded up with barely a groan.

She brought her elbow down on his neck, sending him to the floor. By then the other vorcha had recovered themselves, and more were screaming down the tunnel. Seizing the flamethrower, she backed into the corner, found the throttle, and let loose.

Flame gushed from the nozzle. It caught the two nearest vorcha first. They went down in a torrent of fire, screaming and batting at their gear. The flame spray washed up against the walls and blackened the ceiling. Without pausing, Shepard pivoted and aimed further down the hall. The oncoming pack, hampered by momentum and battle fury, ran straight into the blaze.

A small explosion flipped one of the barriers— another pyro, she assumed, or maybe a grenade. She kept pouring it on until the kerosene tank ran dry.

Cooked and blackened vorcha hung over the remaining barricades, still smoldering. Shepard dropped the empty flamethrower. She still had to get the explosives set.

Another arch lay further ahead. She began fixing ordnance to the walls, praying she finished before more vorcha arrived. Laine needed her now. And she hadn’t heard from Garrus for a lot longer than she was comfortable with.

She set the timer and hauled ass.

Shepard had just rounded the corner when the explosion hit, sending a sandstorm’s worth of dust billowing after her. The remaining vorcha screamed their frustration, muffled by the debris now blocking their way. Shepard grinned.
She put her finger to her ear. “Rag.”

“Almost done,” he panted.

Then Garrus came over the comm. “They’re coming through the sealed hatches. Returning to the barracks.”

Shepard made a split second decision. Garrus was down to the last of his energy, and close combat wasn’t his thing. She’d just have to hope Rag could manage. “On my way back.”

She raced to the apartment. The hatch near the stairs was still sliding open as she barreled into the main room. A varren wriggled through the crack, howling. She shot it in the face.

A krogan standing beyond it let off a shotgun blast. She dove behind the couch.

This had to be the remnants of the merc infiltration team. Those stairs led to Garrus, and Shepard couldn’t get a clear shot from across the room. She scrambled around to the atrium and re-entered through the kitchen, hoping for a better angle.

By then several krogan had arrived, sniffing briefly at the air as they got their bearings. She hunched down behind the island counter and ran the tip of her tongue across her lips. Three krogan was a lot for anyone. But they hadn’t seen her yet.

Sometime during the fight, a plastic bottle of oil got knocked to the floor. She weighed her options, staring at the bottle.

Heavy krogan steps on kitchen tile, heading away, heading towards the stairs.

Fuck it— her life was over anyway. Garrus wasn’t going down, too. Shepard twisted off the top and flung it at the krogan.

A long fluid stream arced from the bottle’s mouth, falling in a curtain over the tiles. It struck the nearest krogan at waist height. He pivoted in place, startled, and laughed when he saw it glugging away on the floor. Shepard braced her arms on the countertop and fired at his knees.

All three of them shot back. On the counter, a basket of apples exploded into pulpy shrapnel. Shepard ducked down.

Come on. She gritted her teeth. Don’t make me make you chase me.

The stairs creaked. Krogan was not one of the languages ALI set her to learn, but she’d picked up the odd phrase, listening to Wrex. She stood up fully, shouted two very particular words, and held down her rifle trigger.

As one body, the krogan stopped, turned, snarled, and charged.

The first hit the oil with two tons of misplaced footstep and went down hard. The second stumbled over his prone body. And the third was so enraged he fired through the both of them in an attempt to reach her.

His haphazard shots took out the shields of everything alive before him, his colleagues as well as Shepard. But she stood her ground. Garrus couldn’t afford anything less.

She aimed at the easiest of the three targets. With their redundant organ systems, no single lucky shot would kill a krogan, but an assault rifle put out a lot more firepower than that.
Another blast from the shotgun exploded against her armor but didn’t seem to do any damage. She was hot all over, painfully warm and ready to burst, like in the slums on Omega when the stairs blew. But it didn’t feel like a bullet wound, so she kept firing, targeting the krogan scrambling to rise from the floor.

Her head sat heavy on her neck with a deep, dull ache. A gray mist fell over her eyes. She struggled to aim her gun at the last remaining krogan.

Then Laine exploded into the living room. “Hey, ugly. You want a piece of me?”

The krogan turned, cursing. Shepard managed to land a shot in his knee. He went down hard, and Laine finished him before he could attempt to rise.

Shepard didn’t pause to make sense of it. If she stopped for even a second, this strange exhaustion would catch up with her. “Thanks. We need to get upstairs.”

Laine stared, mouth agape. Shepard dragged herself forward. “Rag, we have to move.”

“You were glowing,” he said.

“What?” Her head felt packed with cotton. She was certain she’d misheard him.

Before he could clarify, Garrus shouted from upstairs. “Shepard!”

It was then that she realized there had been no cover fire, no backup from above. She took the steps two at a time and paused at the top of the stairs.

Varren and vorcha overran the barracks. Garrus was backed into a corner, his hands full just holding them off. Orders rose in her throat, to set up a crossfire and regroup, when Garm stepped through the hatch into the back room, less than three meters away.

Their eyes met. Her first instinct was to run. Krogan made even her look short, and they were pure predator muscle. Hardly ideal for close combat. But then she thought, when I fell on Khorus, my arm didn’t break.

She held his gaze and spoke to Rag. “Go help Garrus.”

“I’ve got this.” Whatever Cerberus did to bring her back, it was more than physically human. Laine couldn’t know that, but he trusted her with the kind of bond formed by ten years of impossible situations. He disappeared into the barracks.

Right. She lifted her chin, and cracked her knuckles.

Garm roared, and charged.

Shepard knew very well he wouldn’t let her trip him like the Blood Pack from the plague ward. So instead she barreled towards him, as though ready to meet him head-on, and at the last possible moment dropped to the floor and slid past Garm’s lumbering bulk. Before he could turn, she peppered the back of his legs with bullets and was rewarded with a spurt of blood.

He spun, enraged. “I’ll crack your bones for soup.”

“You’ll have to catch me first.” Shouts and gunfire from the barracks demonstrated that fight was far from over. The longer she could keep Garm out of it, the more disorganized his forces would
become, and the better Garrus and Laine’s odds. Shepard darted into the back room.

The floor shook with Garm’s every footfall as he thudded after her. She anticipated the shotgun blast as he cleared the door, and was already rolling aft. Shepard stood and fired in one fluid motion. His left cheek erupted in gore.

But the damage was superficial only, and krogan barely acknowledged pain. He shot again before her bullet even fell behind him, exploding in her face. Her shield deflected the damage with a crack of blue that left stars in her eyes.

Half-blind, she stumbled behind the bed for the slight cover it could provide, only too aware her head should be painting the far wall instead of attached to her neck. Garm was as good as Garrus said, and faster than any krogan she’d met.

Garm laughed. “This is the best the humans could do?”

She eased the knife from her boot, gauged his location, and flipped the bed on top of him with barely a grunt. As she ran to the hallway, she pivoted and left a deep gouge in his side without breaking stride.

He staggered and shoved the mattress off with a growl. “I’ve got three livers, girl. Your toothpick barely scratched one.”

Fricking redundant organs. She plastered her back against a bookcase, tucking her limbs out of sight and disappearing into its shadow, holding the knife close to her chest. Krogan resilience might make them difficult to take out conventionally. But krogan had only one brain.

The floor shuddered irregularly. Maybe her strike did more damage than she thought. She watched his hulking shadow grow across the carpet.

“Is run and hide the only way you know to fight?” he spat, closer than she expected. Shepard counted footfalls. Her timing needed to be perfect.

As he drew level with the bookcase, a half-second before he would have spotted her, she spun into his path, well inside the reach of his arms, already raising the knife.

His massive hand closed over the weapons holstered on her back as she plunged the blade down. Garm was fast— too fast— but she was faster. Shepard buried it to the hilt in his eye socket.

For a moment his remaining eye bulged. She smirked. “Not only run and hide.”

Then he tumbled over like the felling of a great tree, half-dragging her along in the clutch of his dead fingers. She shook him loose with some effort, pried out her knife, and joined her team in the barracks.

Garrus fired at the last of the vorcha. It slumped against the balcony. He sagged a bit. “All done here.”

“We still haven’t still haven’t seen that gunship.” Laine pursed her lips. “Were you able—”

Shepard shook her head. “I stopped the repairs but I didn’t have time to ensure it was grounded.”

Garrus took another long sip from his water bottle. “I took the damn thing out once. I can do it again.”
She eyed the bridge, and considered Garrus’ stamina along with their dwindling supply of thermal clips. They didn’t have nearly enough of anything for another wave. She pushed back her sweat-soaked hair, feeling the ache all through her limbs. This was the longest fight she’d had in god knew how many years. “We should leave. Now. Before they regroup.”

“Fear makes Tarak stupid,” Garrus said, flatly. “He won’t wait for the rest of his troops to be ready.”

Right on cue, Shepard heard the distinct mechanical hum of a gunship approaching outside. “Shit.”

She scuttled over to a window and peaked outside— and ducked as Tarak’s limping ship rose on a column of oily smoke like a demon from the bowels of hell, and began raining lead into the building.

“Archangel!” Tarak bellowed, both hands clamped over the triggers of the ship’s twin guns. Chips of concrete spattered off the walls. “You think your friends can save you?”

He swung the ship sideways. Shepard didn’t dream of attacking. Right now, she only hoped the walls were dense enough to hold up under this kind of fire. A quick glance at the room showed her squad doing the same, Laine against the wall with her, Garrus behind an end table. Surely those guns had to overheat soon.

The hail ceased. Shepard’s rifle was over the balcony in a flash, but nothing was there. She spun towards the bunks— the only other external window— with just enough time to move as Tarak slid around the corner and resumed fire.

“I’ll kill them!” Tarak shot down the length of the room as they all scrambled for new cover, choking the air with foam and dust from the sorely battered furniture. “I’ll kill them all, just like I killed the others! And then I’ll kill you!”

Shepard used his speech to ready her grenade launcher. His guns overheated a second time, but he dipped out of view before she could fire. Her team had yet to take a single shot against the ship. How in the hell had Garrus taken that thing out?

“Movement on the bridge,” Laine called, taking a lightening-swift peek below. “Suns and something else. Guess they had a few more freelancers left.”

Tarak’s ship had moved down, not sideways. Shepard’s eyes narrowed.

But Garrus was either too tired or too distracted to catch the transparent trick. He dragged himself around the table. Her mouth opened to yell a warning—

Tarak rose at the same window before the words could leave her throat, hands at the triggers with a gleeful rage. “Or maybe I kill you first!”

She watched as Garrus half-rose, trying to escape. The bullets tore through his body and left him pinned to the air, twitching in a macabre dance for an endless moment, before he collapsed. “Garrus!”

He made no response. Shepard crawled towards him on her stomach, Tarak screeching laughter all the while. Trying not to think about Jenkins, killed on Eden Prime, by a pair of geth drones in just the same way.

There was so much blood on the floor that Shepard lost traction. She pushed through a blue ocean.
Half his face was a mess of ground meat, his suit’s breast was in tatters, and his eyes wouldn’t focus.

Laine was still trying to fight the ship. Tarak dipped out of sight again. “Nath! I can’t hold him off alone!”

She heard a crash downstairs, followed by gunfire. The Suns had breached the house.

Shepard pulled Garrus’ body into cover with an ugly smear of blue blood, dragged a blanket off the couch, and tried to staunch his many wounds. It soaked through in seconds. She bunched up more cloth, trying desperately to find enough leverage to put real pressure on the wound without exposing herself to the gunship.

“Nathaly, look out!”

She glanced aft, only to see Tarak rising up into the window behind her. He met her eyes with an ecstatic grin. “Say hello to Saren for me.”

She looked down the long black barrel of his gun. Time froze, not a moment left to do so much as yell. It was over. She’d lost, and Rag and Garrus were about to pay the price.

Then a rocket sailed over her head and smacked against ship’s canopy with an explosive roar and sharp crack of glass.

Tarak dropped out of sight. Shepard’s head spun towards the hall.

Miranda Lawson stood in the door, lowering the rocket launcher. Kasumi and Mordin crowded in behind her. Miranda shouted. “Cover the windows! Bring that son of a bitch down!”

Shepard couldn’t string two coherent words together. “What?”

Kasumi and Miranda ran for the balconies. Miranda began to reload her launcher. “You’re a hard woman to find, Shepard.”


“Blood loss at critical threshold.” Mordin opened up his med kid and started laying out supplies. Shepard hadn’t even registered he carried it. “Have suitable needles. Need blood.”

Tarak’s ship re-emerged. She caught the spider web of broken glass out of the corner of her eye. An electric crackle ran over its hull and Miranda fired another rocket. More shots came from downstairs— Jacob and Zaeed, she assumed. Laine had to be confused but for the moment he wasn’t asking questions, coordinating with Miranda’s team as she called out orders.

Shepard got up on her knees, hunched behind the couch, and pushed down on her makeshift bandage. She raised her voice. “We need a cherry juice box!”

Kasumi paused, momentarily distracted from the fight. “A what?”

“A synthetic blood pack,” she said, leaning into the wound.

Garrus’ eyelids fluttered. Shepard doubted he knew his own name. But she tried anyway. “Garrus! We need turian blood packs. Where did you stash them?”

His head bobbed on his neck. She applied yet more pressure to the blanket, yelling in his face. “This was your base. Where the fuck is the blood? Now, you fucking overgrown velociraptor!”
He raised his arm and pointed a quavering finger towards the hall. Just a moment, enough to send Mordin running.

Tarak put in another appearance. This time, Miranda struck the jackpot, sending her third and final rocket straight up the air intake. The explosion rocked the house. Garrus groaned.

But the fight wasn’t over yet. Miranda shouted again, and she and Laine ran to block the Suns coming up the stairs. Kasumi remained fixated on the vocabulary. “What does blood have in common with—”

“Saline drip is a juice box,” Shepard said tersely. “Blood is a cherry juice box. ‘Cause it’s red and vampires drink it.”

“I guess he’s more of a blue raspberry.”

“Not the time.” There was no way to stem the flow. Blue gore seeped past her clenched fingers.

Kasumi thought about it. “So is a glucose drip an MRD?”

Shepard actually looked up and blinked. “No, an MRD is a cocktail.”

“It was a beer in my unit,” Jacob offered, coming into the barracks on Mordin’s heels. He looked at Miranda. “There’s more coming in through the back. We need to get the hell out.”

“Kasumi!” Miranda snapped. The thief heaved a sigh, vanished under her cloak, and reappeared at the balcony, just in time to crush the fingers of a batarian Blue Suns who had the bright idea to climb up the wall. Jacob joined her.

Mordin clutched a pair of plastic bags plump with blue liquid and a tangle of IV tubing. He dropped beside Shepard. She shot him a glance, sweat dripping down into her eyes. God, but this was the longest day. “I hope you know how to perform an intravenous insertion on a turian.”

“Saw many turian patients in clinic.” He sorted out the line, attached it to the bag, and found the needle. “Tricky with low blood pressure.”

The IV needle was metallic, and sharp. Turians had skin like sunbaked leather, hardened by the fine crystalline fibers of metal that shielded them from the harsh radiation of their home world, and the plastic ones humans used for IVs didn’t cut it. Nor were their veins visible. Mordin had to feel along the arm for a pulse that was barely there.

He missed his first jab. Garrus still had the strength and awareness to wince. Shepard took that as a good sign. The second stick hit home, needle gliding in like silk. Mordin scrambled to his feet to loft the bag high and facilitate the drip, and was rewarded to see it flow down the line.

Shepard watched with relief, but didn’t dare take her hands off the wound. Mordin glanced from her to the ongoing fight, and frowned. “Must close wound. Must keep line elevated. Hold with free hand.”

“What free hand—”

Mordin shoved the bag at her, and she was forced to let go of Garrus or drop it. She applied as much pressure as she could one-handed while holding the bag overhead, as far as her arm could reach. It didn’t look like enough. Garrus coughed once, weakly. She took a breath. “Mordin—”

The salarian smeared medi-gel into his wounds, a quick and dirty coagulant. “Can sew shut. Will
hold long enough to reach operating theater.”

“Hurry,” she said. He wormed his hands under hers, working around her as best he could, while she tried to keep pressing down.

Meanwhile, the entire remainder of the team was in the living room below, exchanging bullets and shouts, as the very last of the mercs threw their strength against Garrus’ stronghold. She couldn’t imagine what drove them. Tarak was dead, and they had no love for the Eclipse or Blood Pack. Garrus must have killed too many of their comrades during his raids to forget, even in the face of likely death. That was quite the deep impression. Shepard stared down at him with faint disbelief.

Mordin continued to stitch. “Can remove pressure now.”

Shepard let up, half-expecting blood to spurt out. But the medi-gel did its job. Mordin pulled his suture tight.

She spoke aloud. “We’re going to need an ambulance.”

“Omega ambulance service… problematic. Better to take taxi to hospital.”

The last of the shots died below, just as Miranda came back into the barracks. She swept her hair out of her eyes. Smoke rose from the barrel of her compact submachine gun. “The Suns are a major presence on the station. He’ll never be safe in a hospital. We should take him back to the Normandy.”

The unspoken question hovered in the air. She looked down at Garrus, and back up at her once-X.O., the least likely help she’d ever received.

“Fuck it,” Shepard said. “Let Chakwas know we’re on our way.”

Laine and Shepard sat in the mess, watching the windows of the med bay. Chakwas had drawn the blinds so there wasn’t much to see. Garrus had been in surgery for four hours.

Laine said, “I’ve never evacuated a battlefield in a cab before.”

It was only the latest of several stilted attempts to start a conversation. Shepard peeled the wrapper off a protein bar, as indifferent as ever. Blue gore still spattered her armor where Garrus had bled over her as she crawled to him, though Laine made her wash her hands. “I’ve never scattered the remnants of a merc army by running them down with a car, either, but I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

She took a bite, chewed and swallowed. Laine cleared his throat. “I’m shocked you still have an appetite.”

“I’m starving all the time lately. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, too hungry to sleep.” She slouched down, legs sprawled before her. The chair wasn’t built for someone of her stature and she couldn’t quite get comfortable. “Suppose that’s what I get for eating from a tube for two damn years.”

“Suppose so.” He leaned forward on his knees and studied her. Shepard continued to eat. “Bo, we need to talk about what happened.”

She shook her head. “Damned if I know. I never expected Miranda to come back for me.”
Miranda herself was one deck up, in the CIC, monitoring the situation on Omega. Shepard hadn’t felt the slightest compulsion to chase her out of there.

“Not that,” Laine said. “You. Beating a krogan in hand-to-hand combat. Up and fighting two days after drinking a poison that kills other people. When I came up from that basement, Nath—”

“Cerberus rebuilt me. I don’t have the details.”

“You were covered all over with some kind of glowing blue fog.” He edged a little closer. “I get why you don’t want to talk about it. But this isn’t something you can just ignore. They did something to you.”

Knowing didn’t make it any easier. “Can we not do this right now?”

Laine paused. “He’s going to be alright. He’d be dead by now if things were headed south.”

“Sometimes you’re a stubborn idiot.”

“And sometimes you’re a vengeful, deflecting bitch.” He sat back and crossed his arms. “Hasn’t seemed to stop anyone caring what happens to you.”

“I put this stupid idea in his head.” She crumpled the wrapper and set it on the table. Nudged it with her finger. “I persuaded him to go back to C-Sec and try to work things out, even though I knew he’d never be content there. Garrus couldn’t stand compromise.”

“He picked a bad place to lodge his objections. Omega operates on the principle of looking the other way.”

Shepard got to her feet and walked several paces. The deck was all theirs; the Normandy crew stood their posts, none of them curious or brave enough to come down here and loiter. None had an ounce of Laine’s persistence. “I just wish we’d found that Collector thing before we left. I’m right back where I started.”

“Oh, right.” Laine sat up as if he’d just remembered something, and reached into a front pouch on his utility belt. “I did find something. Strange as hell.”

He put it on the table between them. Lit by lines of bright green, it sat quietly, pulsating to some unknown rhythm, its curves as disproportionate and painful as any reaper device she’d seen. Carefully, she prodded it with her gloved hand. “You weren’t worried this thing would fry your nads?”

Laine laced his fingers behind his head. “They’ve survived worse.”

Shepard snorted and resumed pacing. He took another stab. “Think it’s really Collector tech?”

To her eyes, it looked more Prothean than anything else. Black and green, with those elongated, swept curves that seemed unique to the Prothean aesthetic. But even the Terminus Systems knew better than to mess with Prothean technology. With a value that high, even heavyweights got run over. “Don’t know. Don’t like it. It makes my head buzz.”

“Maybe it’s a fake. Or a lure—”

She stopped and faced him squarely, hands on her hips. “What are you doing here, Rag? Out in the Terminus?”
“I told you, I got fed up.” He stared up at her, insolent. “Why didn’t you high-tail it back to the Alliance as soon as you woke up? You have to realize there’ll be shit all over the wall once they find out.”

The words left her mouth directly from her subconscious, a quietly growing bitter disappointment she had not fully realized was there. “They left me at Alchera.”

He blinked. Shepard was just as surprised. She took a breath. “A few hours to collect the bodies, and none of this would have happened to me. The Alliance can fuck off.”

Laine folded his arms and regarded her evenly for the better part of a minute. She held his gaze. His mouth thinned. “You’re an ungrateful brat. You always have been.”

“You sound like Miranda.”

“You whinge on about Cerberus but they saved your ass just now, and mine, and your friend’s. Your Miranda doesn’t seem half bad to me.” He cocked his head. “Speaking of asses, there have got to be worse fates than getting stuck in deep space with nothing to stare at—”

“Don’t be such a— a guy.” Shepard was perfectly exasperated. “You don’t get it, Rag. I don’t belong to you or the Alliance. I belong to me and I didn’t want this.”

“See, that, that right there, that’s the crazy part of your complaint. We don’t always get what we want, Bo.” He sighed. “I’ve been trying for months to find a way to stop these abductions. You’ve got the resources and the team to actually do it, and you’re throwing it away because you don’t like their benefactor. Steal it from Cerberus if you have to. But goddamn it, Nath. This coalition building, cooperative leadership bullshit is supposed to be what you’re good at.”

She was spared any reply as Chakwas entered, holding a datapad and looking very tired. Her presence altered the gravity of the room. Shepard bit her lip. “Well?”

The doctor’s eyes slid over her small audience before settling on Shepard. “He lost a tremendous amount of blood. I was forced to perform an arterial graft and remove most of a lung. However, I saved his eye, and by sheer dumb luck none of the shrapnel penetrated the cranial cavity.”

She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “He’s going to live?”

“Yes.” Chakwas smiled. “A good long time, if I’m any judge. Provided he stops antagonizing entire armies at once.”

EDI spoke up. “Dr. Chakwas performed an exemplary surgery.”

“Thank you, EDI,” Chakwas said with real warmth. She nodded towards the hatch. “He’s awake now, and asking for you.”

Shepard put her hand on Chakwas shoulder, wordless thanks, and went through the hatch.

Garrus lay on one of Chakwas’ tables, the end propped up to form a bed. A thick swath of gauze plastered half his face, speckled here and there with dots of seeped blood. A patch covered one eye. He’d been stripped out of his hardsuit, and it occurred to Shepard then that she’d never seen more of him than his hands and head, or indeed any turian. Their clothing was modest-bordering-on-prudish by most human standards. The musculature of his shoulders and torso where it disappeared beneath the thin sheet was at once more familiar than she expected, and disconcertingly different.
She cleared her throat. “Garrus?”

One blue eye creaked open as he turned towards her. “Hey.”

His voice seemed to come from a long way off, nothing like as strident as his usual tone. For a moment she couldn’t think of what to say. “You’re one tough son-of-a-bitch.”

Garrus laughed, dying into a hacking wheeze as his sutures interfered. “When I came to, I thought maybe I’d died and woken up on the old Normandy.”

“Cerberus copied the design. This is the SR-2.” She watched his face. “You don’t seem surprised.”

“I hear things.” He tried to shrug, and winced in pain instead. “They brought you back.”

“Long story,” she said, for the second time.

“I think we’ve got a few minutes to spare.”

She sighed, found a stool, and spent a little time arranging herself on it. Garrus watched her all the while, tired, but with more keenness than she’d expect this soon after surgery, to say nothing of the fight behind them. “What do you know about the attack? Two years ago, I mean.”

There hadn’t been time to interrogate Tali. Garrus’ free mandible hugged close to his face, as he thought. Slowly, he said, “You know they didn’t recover the survivors for a month. Got myself in trouble with C-Sec again, digging for information. Nobody knew anything.”

“I’m sorry.” Her mouth ran on autopilot these days. She’d never apologized so much in her life. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m dead, too, and this is judgment, forced to watch how I the way I lived damaged everyone else.”

“Joker said you almost made it to the escape shuttle, but a second attack blew you clear.”

*Her feet paused at the threshold, one last look, aware of all the people she’d failed, all the people she might leave behind to burn by taking that last shuttle out.* But she couldn’t say that. Not to him, one of those people she left, on the ship or no. “Joker had it right.”

“The Alliance gave you a state funeral. Full honors. Broadcast on all the major networks.”

Shepard snorted. “Trust the navy to make a real dog-and-pony show out of handing my mom a flag and saying a few prayers.” Her fingernail worried at a crack in the stool’s plastic cover. She couldn’t meet his eyes. “I expect it’s sitting on my dad’s kitchen table now, right under my grandparents’ portraits, because what will really give you an appetite is remembering the dead.”

Garrus watched her fidget. “Actually, your mom gave the flag to Kaidan.”

Her head jerked up, part the simple electricity of hearing a name she’d tried to avoid for weeks spoken out loud, and part surprise.

“He’s got it on a bookshelf in a wooden frame,” Garrus continued. “I’m not sure I grasp the tradition, but it seemed significant to him. Don’t get me wrong, turians are patriotic, but we don’t go in for personal talismans like that.”

She looked up at him. “Is he ok?”

“You haven’t contacted him?” Garrus was openly shocked.
She shook her head and dropped her gaze. “I can’t… I don’t know how to…”

“This is hard enough with people who aren’t him?” he guessed, with rather too much insight.

But it wasn’t that simple either. She thought about what Laine said. “I spent years as a medical experiment. I don’t even know what I am anymore.”

“Ever think you’re making that one more complicated than it is?”

She went back to picking away at the seat. “Everybody keeps telling me what I should think about this, and nobody seems to give a crap what I actually think.”

Garrus reached over and stopped her hand moving by covering it with his own. “It’s a hell of a story. Maybe you died, but your life didn’t end there. Sooner or later, you have to face it.”

“I saw the bodies in your strong house, and you’ve avoided telling me how they got there. You really want to talk about facing things right now?”

“We had a good operation going. For a while, we were really making things better. But I trusted the wrong person. The last few hours alone in that house, picking off mercs…” He trailed off. “I called my father right before you showed up.”

“In the lull before the freelancers stormed the bridge?” Her eyebrows rose. “Why?”

He regarded her with the kind of frankness that only comes a few times in a life. “Because I was scared. I really thought that was the end.”

She thought of staring down Tarak’s artillery barrel, just before Miranda arrived. A few seconds passed before she spoke. “I wish I could call my dad. But I don’t know what I’d say, and I don’t know how Cerberus would abuse it. So I don’t call.”

“They all died. My whole squad, every person who put themselves in danger because we believed we could change Omega. Because one traitor put himself before his brothers.” He sucked in a breath, and winced at the motion. “You’re right. I can’t talk about this now.”

“After Akuze, I made an art of blaming myself. It was easier than believing there was nothing I could’ve done to save them. If I’d believed that during those months, I’m not sure I could’ve ever gone out again.” Shepard shook her head. “And when I found out there was someone to blame after all, it brought back all of that rage, like it’d never left. Like it just laid low, waiting.”

“Is that why you ran off the ship?” He noted her twitch of surprise. “I couldn’t help noticing none of these very competent people were with you when you arrived.”

“I’ve made better decisions. And worse ones.”

Garrus let it go. “This isn’t Akuze. The person who signed the warrants for my team has a face, and a name.” His stare went very hard. “They all died. All but one. And when I find him, I’ll correct that.”


Garrus turned away. “I think the drugs are catching up to me. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“No shit. When was the last time you slept?”
He chuckled. Shepard stayed until she was sure slumber had him, and made her way back to the mess. Dr. Chakwas had made a cup of tea. She raised an eyebrow at Shepard over the rim.

“He’s resting.” Shepard sat across from her and Laine. “Doctor, I don’t know what to say.”

“None of us are perfect.” She sat back, cradling the mug. “Ms. Lawson told the crew you’d gone ahead to attend to urgent business on Omega. Since that turned out to be very much the truth, I don’t see any need to add additional detail.”

“But we know better, and for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need for apologies.”

“I abandoned you.”

“The first rule of any emergency situation is to take care of yourself,” Chakwas recited, wryly. “That seems to be what you intended. I only hope this time around, you might consider accepting a little help.”

“Fat chance,” Laine muttered. Shepard kicked him under the table.

Chakwas set down her tea. “If I could return to business for just a moment, I would like to visit the Citadel. To ensure a full recovery, Garrus must see a pulmonary specialist as soon as possible, and begin regrowth therapy.”

“Shouldn’t you be asking Miranda?” Shepard raised her eyebrows. “This is her ship now. I left.”

“Perhaps you’ll put in a word.” Chakwas made no attempt to disguise her bemusement. “You do intend to stay?”

Shepard didn’t answer that. Her dignity wouldn’t allow it. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“And I’ll check on our patient.” She got up, paused, and offered her a nod. “It’s good to have you back.”

Laine and Shepard were left standing alone. She brushed off her suit. “Well, I guess this is it.”

“I can stick around if you want.” He licked his lips. “I hate leaving you here alone with this.”

“It’s not your fight,” she said, meaning the mess with Cerberus more than with the Collectors. “One day you might want to go back to the Alliance. I won’t drag you into it.”

He didn’t respond. She tried a little humor. “If you want to take care of that bartender for me…”

Laine’s polite laugh was noticeably forced. She regarded him. He rubbed his nose and looped his thumbs through his utility belt. “You’d tell me if the water’s over your head?”

“The water is exactly at my head.”

He hesitated, started to speak, stopped. “You are one of the only people in the galaxy who really can do whatever she wants with her life. Don’t waste it on something you don’t believe in.”

“I believe if the reapers ever get the upper hand, every last living person in this galaxy will die.” She looked down at the device, still sitting on the table. “And I believe the Collectors are helping them.”
“If it was anyone but you saying it, I’d never buy it. It’s something from a bad movie.”

Shepard snorted. “I wish.”

She walked him to the airlock. As they waited for it to cycle, Laine said, “Seriously, about Miranda. She seeing anyone?”

Shepard stared at him, all disbelief. His face had gone faintly pink. “You want me to wingman for you with a very dangerous woman who hates my guts.”

He scratched his head. “I did save your life. You owe me one.”

“Yeah, you did.” Then she rolled her eyes. “Open a port on your omni-tool.”

He complied, and watched as she transferred a file. “What’s this?”

“The comm address for this ship and the required Cerberus protocols.”

Laine’s eyes widened. “If this is forgiveness, then it must be the end of the world.”

“It’s an open door.” She sighed. “Maybe you’re right about what happened with Chahine. Or maybe I just don’t have the energy to be angry with you anymore. Use it however you like. Though as a friendly warning, Miranda will kick your ass from here to the outer rim.”

“You’re probably right.” He gripped her shoulder for a long moment, and then disappeared down the docking tube, back into the dense metropolis of Omega.

Shepard watched until the crowd swallowed him, and then turned back to the CIC, for a long overdue conversation with chief operative of Lazarus cell.
The Exception to the Rule

August 2185

Shepard found Miranda working at her usual terminal in the CIC. Not, she noted, the galaxy map or the skipper’s terminal. Probably just to continue the ruse that Shepard hadn’t abandoned the ship.

Shepard cleared her throat. Held her hands behind her back, a little stiffly formal. “May I have a word?”

Miranda looked up, and watched her for a tad longer than was entirely comfortable, her eyes unreadable. “Certainly. Perhaps somewhere else?”

“The starboard lounge is usually empty this time of day.” Shepard wanted neutral ground. Not her cabin, and not Miranda’s either.

They said nothing on the elevator. Miranda tagged the hatch and motioned her through, unfailingly polite even in the midst of what had to be a considerable anger.

The hatch shut. Shepard folded her arms and thought of where to begin. The lounge was a library, a quiet counterpoint to the bar and entertainment cabin port side. “This is a nice ship.”

Miranda raised one perfect eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“I was just thinking, on the SR-1 all we had was a tiny corner for a lounge, carved out of the mess. No view at all.” She gestured towards the huge window taking up nearly the entire external wall. “Nothing like this.”

“We did our best.”

“You did more than that.” Shepard took a breath. Made herself turn towards Miranda and look her in the eye. “I owe you an apology. And my gratitude, for saving Garrus.”

Miranda tendered her an exhausted glance, folded her arms and moved away, staring out the glass. They were darkside, Omega’s bulk blocking the light of its sun, and the void was a velvet tapestry pinned up by starlight. “I don’t fail my mission. We have that in common.”

Shepard found herself in the unusual position of parsing her words, thinking or even overthinking every sentence. “Of course you don’t. You’re one of the most competent people I’ve ever met.”

Miranda made an inelegant sound. “I don’t want your flattery.”

“It’s not flattery. I don’t use compliments as currency.” She took a breath. “I should also say you were right. This isn’t your fault. You’re not the reason I died, and you’re not responsible for Akuze or Nepheron either, not personally.”

Miranda started to speak, with an edge in her tone, but seemed to think better of it. Then tried again. “You were bound to be traumatized. I think I got so used to that reality over the years that I stopped remembering that condition occurs because trauma has actually taken place. I could have been more appreciative of your concerns.”

“I could have been more appreciative of the fact that this was your command for two years and I
came in and stomped all over it. What the hell do I know about running a Cerberus op?"

“The Illusive Man did that.” Miranda’s jaw twitched. “But you’re right. I didn’t handle it well.”

“Why come back for me? It had to be more than ticking off the boss.” The Illusive Man had to
know Shepard called her own shots.

Miranda looked back out the port, quiet for a long moment. “My father is a very influential man.
Ambitious, a titan of his industry. He introduced me to Cerberus, believe it or not. He sponsored a
fundraising gala at our house when I was fifteen.”

“He was a donor.” Shepard wasn’t sure what this had to do with her question, but owed it to
Miranda to let her explain as she saw fit.

“A generous one, yes.” She ran her thumb idly around the cuff of her uniform, worrying at it.
“His need for absolute control extended to his personal legacy. He never wanted a daughter. He
wanted a dynasty.”

Miranda was something of a control freak herself, but Shepard was abruptly glad she’d never said
so to her face. “I take it you don’t go home for Christmas?”

That earned a dry laugh. “It’s worse than that. He micromanaged every aspect of my life from my
genetics up. What I studied and when, who I met, how I spoke, how I dressed. From the time I
could walk I had lessons in body language— how to send a message, and how to read one. He’d
refined his technique, you see, because I wasn’t the first daughter he grew out. I was just the first
one he kept.”

Shepard blinked. It sounded like Miranda was implying… but she didn’t know a good way to ask
that out loud. And she knew for a certainty Miranda wouldn’t want her sympathy. “Why tell me
this?”

“Because when I decided to leave, when I quite literally fought my way out of that life, Cerberus
took me. They sheltered me from his wrath even though it cost them his money. They gave me a
better purpose.”

Shepard let that sink in. “How old were you?”

“Old enough to know what I wanted.” Then she softened her tone, just a little. “That’s the side of
Cerberus you never saw in the Alliance. I won’t defend everything we’ve done, but I’d bet every
credit to my name you wouldn’t defend the all of the navy’s actions, either.”

“I won’t take that bet. But this still doesn’t explain why you tracked me down again.”

“Because I realized I was holding you accountable for something no reasonable person could
expect you to understand, given your history with Cerberus. And it was very personal for me. I
lost a professional perspective of the situation.”

“I put a gun to your head. If that’s not losing professionalism, I don’t know what is.” Shepard felt
perfectly justified at the time, but now she mostly felt ashamed. “I’m truly sorry for that. It wasn’t
the right way to handle it.”

“Someone went to pains to point out that if I discovered that my enemies put mysterious implants
in my head, I wouldn’t have reacted well, either.” She cleared her throat. “I’ll get you what
records I have. But with Lazarus Station destroyed…”
“I understand.” It was a bitter pill to swallow, but she suspected Miranda told the truth. “So where does that leave us?”

“I’m willing to give it another try, if you are.” Miranda held out her hand, her turn to be formal.

Shepard hesitated, then reached out and shook it. “Deal.”

They both relaxed, a response to the dissipating tension in the air. Shepard tilted her head. “How did you find me? I covered my tracks pretty well.”

Miranda made a noise of exasperation. “We matched your financial data to a ticket sold from Korlus to Omega. After we got to the station, it was a matter of hacking surveillance and interrogating leads. It wasn’t easy. I couldn’t believe you’d go after Archangel after being so dismissive of our prep work.”

“If I’d known Archangel was Garrus…” Shepard was still shaken by how close a thing it was.

“I can imagine.” She paused. “I was surprised you didn’t ask your other friend to stay. Laine.”

She shook her head. “Old, bad blood. I’m getting over it but there’s such a thing as too much, too soon.”

Even starting to get over it was further than she expected to get, ever.

Miranda either already knew the story from her research into Shepard’s life, or didn’t pry. “So how do you see our next move?”

Shepard was just as glad to move on. “Dr. Chakwas needs us to visit the Citadel, to get Garrus proper treatment. And once he’s up to it, I need to pick his brain about everything he knows about the connection between the Suns and the Collectors.”

“I gave that device you found to Mordin. No word yet, but he’s barely begun his analysis.”

“Good.” Shepard didn’t expect him to learn much, but she’d been wrong a lot lately. “During the cruise we’ll put together a strategy for fighting the Collectors. A real one.”

Miranda nodded. “I’d like to go after another dossier. The prisoner, Jack.”

“Jack’s being held on a Blue Suns prison ship, right?”

“That’s correct. You think it’s an opportunity to collect more intel?”

“Doesn’t hurt to try. After all, the Collectors want human samples, and the Suns sold Jack to you.” Shepard felt they were overdue for some kind of major break. “At worst, we’ll have another gun on our team.”

“That gets us through next week.” Miranda actually smiled, a real one, not one of her put-ons. “I’m sure by the time we get there, our next step will be obvious.”

Shepard found herself returning it. “As you were, Operative Lawson.”

Her mouth twitched. “Shepard.”

Shepard left the lounge, and headed upstairs to get out of her itching hardsuit and into a proper shower.
The next morning, Shepard made her usual way down to the shuttle bay. But this time she kept her run to strictly thirty minutes. If recent events were any evidence, her self-discipline was in as desperate need of repair as her physiology.

Then, just as deliberately, she showered and went to the mess for breakfast. Not some half-burned eggs and toast cooked by herself and downed in that same solitude, but real mess, with the rest of the crew. If they doubted Miranda’s story that Shepard had gone ahead to Omega on urgent business, it didn’t show. Though she imagined Garrus’ face was convincing evidence.

Talking with them felt easier. Less guarded, more enjoyable. More like the SR-1, as much as that comparison stung. With her present clarity Shepard could tell not all of that had been about Cerberus. Some of it was simply because her crew had died, and it did hurt to see them replaced. It would have hurt even if she survived to command another Alliance ship.

And after that, she faced her most daunting task yet. She took a deep breath, and walked into Mordin’s lab.

Both Mordin and Dr. Chakwas awaited her. She cleared her throat. “Good morning.”

“Shepard.” Mordin was elbows deep in a glovebox at the far end of the lab. “Just a moment. Delicate process. Must complete before we talk.”

“Commander,” said Chakwas.

“How’s our patient?” she asked, knowing she was procrastinating, but also knowing she wouldn’t do it for more than a few minutes. Surely she could give her fears that much comfort.

“Doing better with every hour.” Chakwas was beyond pleased, and a bit self-satisfied—but hell, she’d earned it. “By the time we arrive at the Citadel, I’ll have to tie him to the bed to keep him on rest.”

Shepard snorted. “Kaidan threatened to do just that when I was stuck in the Kilimanjaro’s med bay after the Battle of the Citadel.”

Chakwas gave her an odd look. “What are you talking about?”

Her brow furrowed. “On the Kilimanjaro, the night after the battle. Before I snuck down to the Normandy.”

“You didn’t have a lucid thought for fifty hours after the battle. They put in a drain to relieve the brain swelling, but there wasn’t anything else they could do but wait. I’m surprised you remember anything.” Chakwas gave her a gentle smile. “Kaidan was there. He stayed at your side the whole time, over your doctor’s strong objections.”

That stung, more than it should have. Chakwas said it almost like she could tell Shepard missed him horribly, a small unwelcome reminder. Shepard took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking about what you said. I do need to understand what was done to this body. There have been some strange events.”

“Strange how?”

At the other end of the lab, Mordin finished his work and withdrew his hands from the gloves. He went to a datapad and glanced at them. “Am listening. Useful skill, multitasking. Please
continue.”

Which was when Miranda walked in. At Shepard’s glance, she answered, “I was reporting Garrus’ status. Cerberus is eager for us to continue our mission. I hope I haven’t delayed you.”

For once, Shepard didn’t feel an urge to berate her for being late. Miranda’s job might be different, but it was at least as vital as her own, and she’d been late plenty of times. If Cerberus withdrew their support, this mission was dead in the water. The misadventure with Garrus made that much clear. “I was just explaining that some odd things have happened since I woke up. Medically-speaking.”

“Like what?”

Shepard started with the simplest. “I took a nasty fall on Korlus. My arm should’ve snapped like a twig when all my weight landed on it. I expected it. But all I got was a bruise.”


Miranda put her hand on her hip and leaned out slightly. Shepard finally recognized it for what it was— her idle, thinking posture. Maybe it was a put-on sometimes, but not all the time. Not now. “A number of your bones were badly broken post-mortem. Bone takes forever to grow as cloned tissue, and what we grew would never exactly match a limb that’s seen thirty years of hard use. Better to scan the pieces and have composites made to measure.”

“And that’s stronger?” Shepard asked.

“We enhanced your muscular system where we implanted the artificial bones, to compensate.”

That explained some of the unfamiliar reflexes. Faster, stronger, sometimes too much so. But she was in dangerous territory now. She chewed her lip, not sure she wanted the answer, but realizing she needed it. “How many of my organs are artificial tissue?”

“No that many, at this point. We had you on machines for the first year.” Miranda looked at the ceiling, reciting. “Most of your lymph system, your pancreas, both kidneys—”

“I thought kidneys were easy to clone.”

“Yes, but your body wouldn’t take them. I don’t know why. We tried twice.” Miranda strained her memory. “Let’s see… a heart valve, I think. And one ovary.”


“Ovaries are a vital component of your endocrine system. They produce critical hormones,” she chided. “We couldn’t replicate reproductive function, of course. It’s a complex organ. Your other one survived your accident, but given the extensive damage you endured, it was impossible to evaluate function in those first months. Hence the backup.”

She digested that. “That’s… very thorough of you.”

“The Illusive Man wanted you—”

“Exactly as I was. I know.” Shepard sighed, thoroughly exhausted of hearing it. “I’m going to regret asking, but how are bones broken post-mortem?”
“Your body was abandoned in an extensive debris field, in a decaying orbit. Collisions were inevitable.”

That wasn’t actually as bad as she feared. “I also got poisoned.”

“What?” Chakwas was alarmed. “When?”

“On Omega. Laine saw it happen and took care of me.” She shrugged, a bit self-conscious. “He said it should’ve killed me. It was a bartender and apparently he’d done this to humans before.”

Miranda leaned on the lab counter. “Without knowing the nature of the poison, I can only speculate on how it was neutralized.”


“Your liver’s natural, but most of it’s brand-new.” Miranda considered the question. “Artificial organs can go either way. They’re more efficient in some individuals, less so in others, and the only data I have is from when you were comatose.”

“It won’t match your biometrics now that you’re awake,” Chakwas explained, in response to her confused stare. “In any case, I reiterate my suggestion that we scan you fully. That will give us a new baseline. I can compare it to what I have from before your death.”

Mordin bobbed his head. “Data always sheds light on complex situations. Operating in the dark never recommended.”

Shepard let out a breath. “Alright. I don’t like it, but I can’t say you’re wrong. Where do we start?”

Chakwas kept her in the med bay for the next two hours. As promised, the scans were completely non-invasive, but Shepard felt stripped naked all the same. All she could think about as she stared at the ceiling was her flashes of memory from that Cerberus table, of needles and cold air and joking techs handling her like a carcass.

Just when she thought she couldn’t take this for another second without losing her composure in a spectacular and humiliating fashion, Chakwas put up her gear. “That’s enough for today.”

Shepard wondered whether Chakwas had noticed, too, and decided to call it based on that, but chose not to ask. She was still allowed a little dignity. “When will Garrus be awake?”

Chakwas checked the time. “The pain meds have done their usual number, but his next dose is at 1400. He should be awake for an hour so then.”

“Thanks.” She made a note of it, determined to come down and see him at least once today. She still felt responsible for what happened.

But before that, she had one last item on her agenda. She headed for the bridge.

Joker didn’t even turn around when she came in, not even when EDI spoke up. “Hello, Shepard.”

“EDI.” She glanced at the blue globe. It remained still awkward, talking to it, but a little less so all the time. “Good to see you. Hello, Joker.”

“Commander,” Joker said, grudgingly, his attention nominally still on the controls.
“The ship’s in port,” she observed.

“There’s still check-out lists.”

She crossed her arms and sat back on her heel. “Alright, let me have it.”

Joker brought up another display. “Have what?”

“Miranda might have fooled the rest of the ship, but not you. You knew I wasn’t planning to come back.”

Joker finally looked up, if only into the forward ports. She could see his reflection in the glass, his stubborn stoicism, the slight hint of real anger. “I wish you’d stop rending your garments something goes wrong for you, is all.”

“Where in the hell did you pick up that phrase?”

“I had to take high school lit, too,” he protested. “Shit gets hard, but you stand your post.”

“This wasn’t my post. It was just someplace I wound up.”

He turned around then. “Wasn’t.”

“Miranda and I came to an agreement. I’m in.”

“So good to hear.”

“Go fuck yourself.” She was done having this argument with everyone in her life. “Maybe it only took you five hot minutes to decide to sign up with Cerberus, but some of us need just a little bit longer to consider working with a bunch of Alliance-murdering terrorists.”

He deflated slightly. “It took longer than five minutes.”

“That’s… reassuring.”

EDI pulsed. “Mr. Moreau was first approached two months before he elected to leave the Alliance.”

Joker whirled on her. “You have my personnel file?”

“Of course. It is necessary to several of my functions.”

Shepard saw her escape and took it, retreating to the CIC. Maybe things weren’t completely smoothed over with Joker, but she wasn’t hiding from him, and he was speaking to her, and that was good enough for now.

Miranda caught her attention. “Shepard, a moment.”

She went to her own terminal, just right of Miranda’s. “Sure. What do you need?”

“We’re ready to depart, but before we do, we should go back aboard Omega one last time and meet with Aria.”

“What?” Shepard was truly taken aback. “Why would I ever want to do that?”

“I’ve spent the remainder of the morning reading news reports.” Miranda straightened and handed
her a datapad. “By killing off all of the senior station-side merc leadership, you’ve ignited what’s
going to become a large scale civil war between each of the three core factions. The least we can
do is see her before we go.”

She scanned the summary. “This is for real?”

“Mercs provide all of the protection, a good amount of the transportation, and control most
shipping operations to and from the station. This will impact Omega for months to come.”

“And meanwhile, Omega is the best place to refuel and resupply in the whole Terminus.”

“Sometimes the only place. We can’t afford for Aria to ban us.”

“Alright.” Shepard put down the datapad. “When?”

“Right now, if you like. Get it over with.” For the first time, Shepard noticed Miranda wasn’t
excited about this, either. Maybe she was finally letting her see it.

But as it happened, she agreed completely. “I’ll meet you at the airlock in ten minutes.”

Shepard rode the elevator to her cabin. Briefly, she considered suiting up, but if Aria decided to
kill her in her own club, it wouldn’t be much help. Instead she strapped on her pistol, a basic
requirement of going ashore at Omega, checked the knife in her boot, and headed out.

Miranda had likewise armed herself. “Ready?”

“After you.”

It was a short walk from their docking tube to Afterlife, the largest and most spectacular of the
several clubs owned by Aria T’Loak. Shepard didn’t know much about her. She’d been an
institution on Omega for hundreds of years, and had a hand or at least a few fingers in every major
operation aboard the station. Omega might lack a government, but power vacuums were the same
everywhere, and Aria had plugged more than a few.

Omega wasn’t a place she’d want to live. On the other hand, she was beginning to understand
what drove people to the so-called frontier was what she liked about the Alliance— boundaries,
direction, cooperation. She had no idea where she’d be without those things. Probably dead, or
incarcerated in some forgotten hellhole at the edge of the galaxy. She just didn’t know when to
stop.

Her Terminus crew chafed at the very suggestion of such restrictions. Some people had natural
boundaries that conflicted with their society and maybe they needed room to stretch their legs. Her
problem was lacking them entirely until someone taught her otherwise, and held her to them. Even
now, the distant threat of what the Alliance would do with her once this was finished hung like a
comforting blanket over her every decision. At least if she really screwed up, someone would
eventually hold her accountable for whatever damage she caused.

Shepard stared up at the ten-meter screen towering over the entrance to Afterlife, featuring a series
of asari dancers striking lurid poses. Real flames flanked each side of the display.

“Is this really necessary?” she asked, rhetorically.

“It does seem excessive.” Miranda tilted her head. “I thought asari didn’t have any concept of
hell?”
“Drama is our most popular export, as a species.” She sighed. “Come on, let’s go.”

They brushed past the line of hopefuls without so much as a glare from the bouncer. A trio of batarians got to their feet as Shepard entered the atrium, ready for a fight, but she wasn’t in the mood. As the leader opened his mouth, without pausing her step, she fixed him with one of her special glares. He chose to keep his silence.

The club itself sprawled across three levels arranged around another vast holographic screen, bars huddled in alcoves about the perimeter. In keeping with the name, every light glowed in shades of red, and more open flames set shadows flickering in the booths and across the dance floor. Performers in costumes all but painted on wriggled on daises, delivered drinks, and occupied laps with knowing smiles and hushed giggles.

Shepard wasn’t in the mood for that, either. A stench of sweat and sour liquor pervaded the air. Customers of every gender and species enjoyed themselves with an edge of desperation that made the Afterlife’s function as a club seem more of an afterthought. Everyone allowed into this building was notable to Aria in some way, or came as a guest of someone who was. Shepard had never met Omega’s infamous asari queen, but the attention of anyone who built a place like this station would come attached to a leash.

Miranda crossed her arms. “It’s like a faerie court, isn’t it.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. Her X.O. wasn’t prone to whimsical references. “Complete with poisoned drinks.”

Her glance was startled. “It happened here?”

Shepard nodded. “In the basement bar. It’s a little more relaxed than up here. Lacks that deep spiritual apathy of people yearning after hollow things.”

“That’s very nearly poetic.”

Another batarian approached them, less aggressive than Aria’s first minion, and dressed in what passed for a security uniform. “Commander Shepard. Welcome to Afterlife.”

She didn’t mince words. “I’m here at Aria’s invitation. Where is she?”

“Aria’s preoccupied with station business. She’ll be with you shortly. In the meantime, we’ve cleared a table.” He pointed to a corner. “You can wait there.”

Seeing no alternative, they settled into the booth and ordered drinks. Their waitress sauntered off, her skintight costume not so much leaving nothing to imagination as deliberately provoking it. “I’m so glad we didn’t bring Massani.”

“Quite.” Miranda sipped.

Shepard stuck with beer this time, and opened the bottle herself. “You really think we have a shot at this?”

“Defeating the Collectors?”

Shepard nodded. “They’ve got the resources to abduct hundreds of thousands of people without a fight and without a trace. I don’t like those odds.”

“Then we need to find a way to even them. The Illusive Man is convinced that’s the Omega 4
“Do we have any proof their home world is on the other side?”

“Not as such. But you have to admit, it’s one hell of a security system.”

She sat back in the booth. “We need more than a relay. We need to understand why they’re doing this, figure out their motives. That’ll give us something to use against them.”

Miranda suddenly understood. “Trip them up.”

“Exactly.” She took another sip and wiped her mouth. “The Suns could be our way in. But I don’t want to bet the farm on it.”

“If this meeting goes well…”

“That’s what I’m saying.” It would at least give her a better reason for spending her time like this.

The batarian returned. “Aria will see you now.”

Shepard got up. “Showtime, I guess.”

Miranda squeezed out of the booth. “Ready when you are.”

He led them up to a secluded box overlooking the club, somehow shielded from the worst of the noise and spacious in its emptiness. A few more security stood close at hand. The sunken couch, large enough for twelve, held only a single asari, clad in a white leather jacket that glowed against her dark purple skin. She didn’t even glance their way as they reached the top. “Check them, Anto.”

The batarian activated his omni-tool and reached towards her. Shepard put her hand on her gun. “A body scan isn’t the most polite way to begin a conversation.”

“It’s not optional.” Aria still refused to grant them her full attention. “That could be anyone wearing your face.”

Shepard considered leaving. But Miranda thought Aria might deny them access to the station, and that would shoot all her other plans straight to hell. She jerked her head at Anto and feigned nonchalance as he performed his duty.

His omni-tool beeped. “They’re clean.”

Then, at last, Aria turned to look at her. “It’s not every day a dead spectre crawls onto my station. You could have been anyone. Anything. This is almost boring.”

Shepard would have taken that as a hint of fear, the voice of someone always waiting for a knife from the shadows, if it wasn’t so obviously an act. Instead, she guessed curiosity. Which really was boring. “Is that why you asked to speak with me?”

“I know everything and everyone that moves on Omega. I don’t stay so well informed by playing timid.” Aria gestured at the couch.

Shepard took a seat, joined by Miranda. “My colleague, Ms. Lawson.”

“We’ve met.” Aria laid her arms over the cushions and crossed her legs. “Indirectly. Mutual… acquaintances.”
Miranda glanced at Shepard, unperturbed. “Your body passed through Omega while I was working to stop the Collectors from acquiring it. Aria traded useful intelligence. I thought she might do business again.”

Aria’s eyes slid from one woman to the other. “Interesting.”

Miranda shifted in her seat. Shepard didn’t allow either of them to see she’d noticed. “I thought you’d be older. Omega’s been around a long time.”

She laughed like she’d never found ignorance more charming. “Older than even an asari life.”

“I doubt you worked your way up.”

Aria stood. “That’s as privileged as information gets. I don’t count friends or enemies until I see how useful they can be.”

“Then I suspect we won’t be much of either.” Shepard had no intention of becoming one of Aria’s tools.

“Oh, but I think Omega is very useful to you, Shepard. Allow me to introduce myself properly.” Aria turned towards the club, the sweep of her arm encompassing the whole station. “I’m the boss, CEO, queen if you’re being dramatic. It doesn’t matter. Omega has one ruler and only one rule.” She enunciated every word. “Don’t fuck with Aria.”

The queen’s mouth turned up in a small, self-satisfied smile.

That was the moment Shepard decided she was done, logistical math be damned. This was egoism at its worst. “I’ve heard you can take the measure of a leader by how well they treat their people. I took your measure in the slums.”

“You sound like that idiot, Archangel,” Aria replied, dismissive. “I don’t think anyone has to like me, Shepard, but I don’t think you’re dense enough to try that if we were in public. Even now, I can read it on your face. Just how much trouble can she cause me? How much do I need Omega to stop the Collectors?” She resumed her seat, tilting her head against the backrest. “The answer to both is more than you can afford. And yes— I know who you’re hunting. I threw them off my station.”

She wasn’t wrong. Shepard had enough headaches. But her mouth ran on without her. “Funny. I spend two years dead and suddenly everyone’s forgotten I’m a gigantic pain in the ass.”

“Omega doesn’t care about you.” Aria gave her a very tired look. “Yet.”

Miranda, sensing the meeting teetered on the verge of disintegration, made an attempt to get what they came for. “We retrieved Archangel. He shouldn’t be a problem for you anymore.”

“If you make your own laws— and everyone here does— he made life difficult.” Aria folded her hands over her stomach. “But I can’t deny he made it interesting. How you extracted him has made things even more interesting.”

Shepard also sat back, just as casual. “You might like to know Tarak was mainly pissed about an interloper screwing with his station.”

She emphasized the pronoun just slightly. Aria studied her fingernails. “Is that so.”

“From what I saw in the slums, the Suns have big heads. It’s got to sting, being on an even footing
Aria made a face. "I’m not a simpleton. I know your unintentional revolution presents an opportunity. Most disruptions do."

"I’m merely suggesting others near the top, Tarak’s advisors, have got to be a cocky bunch. Probably share his views."

Aria gave her a sidelong glance. "Is this because you’re worried about your docking privileges, or because you know the Suns are working with the Collectors?"

Shepard spread her arms. "Why not both?"

She let out a single snrk. "They have a base on Sanctum. No great secret, but most of their smuggling ops flow through there." Then she looked away, at the club spread out below. "More requires real payment, and I’m not in the mood for doing business."

Shepard didn’t make any attempt to change her mind. "We’ll let you get back to your work."

"Don’t be a stranger," she said, disinterest spoiled by just the thinnest veneer of syrupy acid coating the words. "And Shepard? For all his idealism, even Archangel was smart enough to steer clear of me."

Miranda and Shepard descended to the club in silence. As they neared the exit, Miranda grabbed her arm. "We needed her information. More than just a little tip."

"I don’t care who or what she knows. It’s not worth kissing that woman’s ass."

Miranda threw up her hands. "You never sucked it up for the Council? Or your superiors in the navy?"

"She’s a self-appointed, condescending, cutesy little—" Shepard took a breath. "It’s done. We’ll find another way."

They returned to the ship. Shepard went to the galaxy map and plugged in the destination. "We’re leaving."

Jacob glanced between them. "That was fast. Don’t tell me you antagonized Aria."

"We had a perfectly civil conversation. She likes long walks in the smog."

Miranda sighed. "It was fine."

Shepard looked to EDI’s orb. "All crew present and accounted for?"

"Yes, Shepard. We are at maximum fuel and the drive core is fully discharged."

"Tell Joker we’re go." She stepped down and nodded at Miranda and Jacob. "I need a new intelligence source on the Collectors. Surely Cerberus has something tucked away."

Jacob straightened, his hands flowing behind his back. "We’ll see what we can find."

"Good." She glanced at the time. It was 1412. "I’m late for an appointment."
Out of the Frying Pan

August 2185

Alenko slung the latest bag of trash down the incinerator shaft and wiped the sweat off his brow with his sleeve. After ten years on a ship, he had only the faintest memory of Saturdays when he got this posting. Longer than that. In college he spent the weekends cramming, and Jump Zero’s schedule didn’t conform to a standard business week. Now he spent them on thankless chores. If that wasn’t adulthood in a nutshell, he’d eat his socks.

He glanced behind him at the other five bags floating in a train down the hall, and grabbed the next in line. Citadel Security finally let him back in his apartment Friday afternoon. No hint of an apology, or a lead. Just a vague “we’ll be in touch” and voucher for a cleaning service. That company’s rep took one look at the place and gave a quote that more than tripled what C-Sec was willing to cover, and Alenko was going on night five in a hotel, aboard a station not exactly renowned for its low cost of living. Not to mention half his furniture was beyond all repair, the insurance company was dragging its heels on issuing payment, and property management sent a formal threat to not renew his lease due to “lack of care”.

None of that bothered him, not really, but chewing it over made a good distraction from the bigger questions of who broke in, and what exactly made it worthwhile. Alenko had worked out the so-called Collector tech was some sort of communications device. He kept telling himself the second he could prove it, he’d turn it over to the Alliance for proper disclosure to the Council, but his fascination got the better of him. Now it was in Cerberus hands; nothing else made sense.

Cook vacillated between demands for progress reports on the missing items, and preventing all such progress with micromanagement and red tape. All Alenko had so far was what Bailey suspected, and he wasn’t eager to share that with Cook. Someone had used Shepard’s biometrics to get in without tripping alarms. The only people who might have that were Cerberus or the Alliance, and why the hell the Alliance would do it, he couldn’t begin to guess.

And then there was that tiny voice at the back of his mind, the one that sounded like Liara, asking the other question. The one that wasn’t sure if he was more terrified Shepard was alive and acting as a Cerberus puppet, or that she wasn’t. When he closed his eyes he could still see her on that table filled with tubes, real enough to touch. Her hand warm and vital in his.

But the station was gone. Shepard was gone with it. Had to be. She couldn’t be moved, and there was no way she wouldn’t have reached out to him, if she was alive and awake and autonomous.

Which led him back to the puppet question. Dear god, but he was sick of this circular thinking. It plagued him day and night.

As he invoked his biotics and tossed the last bag down the chute, he caught sight of his elderly neighbor, Charles Simon, staring. Wasn’t hard to guess at what. He offered a friendly wave. The man made a strangled noise and disappeared back inside his apartment, trash abandoned outside his door. Some things never changed; even living on the Citadel did little to make humans less nervous around biotics.

Grumbling, he disposed of Simon’s trash as well, then raised his arms over his head to stretch out sore muscles as he ambled back towards his own door. Clearing debris and hauling heavy bags all day made for a decent workout. He stopped at the fridge, pulled out a beer, and took several sips while he surveyed the remaining wreckage.
The bedroom was just about clean. Maybe, maybe, if he could get a mattress delivered on short notice, he could sleep at home tonight. The intruder ripped his apart, as though the best place to store delicate technology was wedged between the springs.

Alenko grabbed a fresh bag from the roll and started clearing a wider path, just in case he could swing the delivery, when his omni-tool flashed. He slapped the call alert. “Alenko.”

“Sounds like you’re enjoying your day off,” drawled Jackson, with a hint of humor.

He made an effort to suppress the grumpiness. “Sorry. Dealing with this mess is slowly driving me insane. Do you need me to come in?”

“Perish the thought. No, a courier came down from the Council’s office. Councilor Anderson requesting a moment of your time.”

His brow furrowed. “Anderson wants to see me? Why?”

“Something about a special assignment.” A brief pause, a verbal shrug. “Cook couldn’t sign the approval fast enough. You really got his knickers in a knot.”

“Well, I kind of deserve it.” Alenko knew damn well the only reason Cook had not, at the very least, brought him into disciplinary counseling was the incident also indicted him. He let Alenko maintain personal custody of the items.

“That’s true.” This pause was more like a dead mouse in a drawing room. “You know, if you can’t get the stuff back…”

“I know.” Alenko had no desire to discuss it. “What time do I report to Anderson’s office?”

A faint electronic beep as she checked a note. “1700 hours.”

That was less than thirty minutes from now. He cursed. “Thanks. I need to get moving.”

“Good luck.” She ended the call.

Alenko cast a glance around the room, spied a towel that somehow escaped the carnage, and hauled himself to the bathroom for a quick shower.

He reached the office just as Anderson’s asari assistant was ushering in in the other guests, four officers he didn’t recognize. Her expression was all disapproval, but she let him inside, and closed the hatch behind them.

Anderson waited alongside a sober-faced major, her uniform just a little too crisp, shifting in her shoes. Alenko sympathized. His own dress uniform itched like crazy. The thief slashed open the pockets of most of his clothes, searching for the smaller device, and he hadn’t had time to even wash the new ones yet. Factory-fresh wool without any fabric softener might as well be sandpaper.

Whether or not Cook considered this a punishment, Alenko considered it a welcome opportunity. He wouldn’t have to tiptoe around the subject of Nathaly, not with Anderson, and when it came to a potential breach of Alliance personnel data the Councilor’s reach outstripped C-Sec.

Councilor Anderson, never much at ease in a suit, thanked them for coming and gestured to a set of couches off to one side. Alenko remembered the office from when it housed Ambassador Udina. Little had changed. Even the expansive view of the Presidium looked much the same, the repairs from Sovereign’s assault in ‘83 blended seamlessly into the original architecture. Elsewhere
aboard the Citadel, the situation wasn’t as rosy.

“I’ll get right down to it.” Anderson said, as they settled into their seats. One officer joined them remotely, his face projected from a vid terminal, but he was no less attentive to Anderson’s introduction. “Human colonies in the Terminus are under assault by a large, organized, and unknown enemy force. Freedom’s Progress is the eighth attack we can link to this shadow war.”

A subtle current ran through the room. The facts shocked no one, but the admission ran contrary to every public statement the Alliance had made on the attacks for the past twelve months.

“We’ve publicly denied it to prevent panic along the Traverse border, but the attacks are escalating. Not only lives are at stake. If this continues, the Alliance stands to lose a critical buffer zone, vital trade partners, and the confidence of our citizens.” Anderson folded his hands. “Does anyone need a minute?”

“Is the Council finally prepared to let us do something about it?” asked a woman to Alenko’s right. A murmur of agreement followed that. Human colonies beyond Alliance borders might not be officially within their purview, but they felt a responsibility just the same.

“Not in force.” Anderson settled back into his seat. “They’ve agreed to allow the Alliance to supply defensive systems to at-risk settlements, and transport support personnel beyond Council space to install the equipment.”

A second officer scoffed. “That’s it?”

“We’ve also negotiated increased leniency to conduct intelligence-gathering operations in the Terminus. A few of you have already reaped the benefits of that. But that’s not why I asked you here.” He nodded to the major.

Well, that explained why Alenko and the rest of his team had been allowed so many missions into the Terminus lately. He’d actually started to wonder if Cook had more pull than he let on.

The major handed them each a packet labeled with the name of a colony. Her own name badge read ZHU. “Six settlements accepted our offer of aid. Most of them lie along the fuzzy border of the Traverse, with very divided opinions on whether they should consider themselves Alliance citizens or Terminus residents. We’ve assigned each one to an officer, who will coordinate the effort on that world.”

Anderson looked at each of them in turn. “We selected the six of you based on your service histories and skill sets, as well as your discretion. While we want to protect the colonists however we can, this may be our only opportunity to collect information on the ground. Attacks on this scale don’t come out of nowhere.”

Alenko glanced down at his packet and read the label. Shadow Sea, Iera – HORIZON. The first page was a fact sheet, listing basic environmental parameters and colony statistics. “665 thousand people isn’t a particularly small colony. Couldn’t we insert agents?”

“We have, but their effectiveness is limited.” Zhu shook her head. “Most Terminus colonies are highly impoverished. It’s not so much that everyone knows everybody else, as all messages off-world ultimately flow through a single comm tower, to a single buoy. It’s impossible to pass something secretly without raising suspicion. We have no idea who is instigating these attacks, or the true breadth of their capabilities. Monitoring transmissions off vulnerable colonies isn’t a stretch.”
Another officer spoke up. “What are you expecting us to do, then?”

“Observe,” Anderson rumbled. “You’ll be out there a month or two, and given what you’re installing, you’ll have some license to dig around in the colonial defense systems, see if anyone’s been messing around. No status reports on the unofficial mission unless it’s a real emergency. We’ll debrief you upon return. Major Zhu, if you’ll proceed.”

She nodded. “Each dossier contains specific information on your target colony, your team, and the assets we are providing.” Her eyes shifted to the vid terminal. “Lieutenant Vega, you should have received yours via encrypted electronic transmission this morning.”

“Copy that.” His beefy face grew a grin. “Don’t know what a briefing book can tell me about a place I’ve lived two years, though.”

“If you’ll turn to the pages concerning the hardware,” Major Zhu suggested, testily.

They all opened their dossiers. Horizon was getting GARDIAN laser turrets. They made a good ground defense against light ships, like those used by pirates and slavers, and a deterrent to larger, but also contained sensitive technology. The kind no self-respecting government would want to fall into enemy hands in the event of an attack. The Alliance took this threat more seriously than he supposed; the anti-aircraft system was quite the bribe.

Vega gloated over his colony’s award. “State-of-the-art kinetic barriers. Nice.”

Anderson would have none of it. “We have a better relationship with Fehl Prime than most Terminus colonies. I trust your enthusiasm, or loyalty, won’t cause you to forget the reason for sending this system.”

The lieutenant straightened. “No, sir.”

Zhu was losing patience. Her mouth thinned into a line. “We’re sending a support team with you, including experts in your respective equipment, to handle the installation. However, as the lead, I expect you each to familiarize yourself with the specs. Nobody will be under the impression you’re a tech. However, a blatant lack of preparation will tip our hand to the colonists. You need enough knowledge to address any difficulties with authority.”

The Normandy had a GARDIAN system. Most modern frigates did. Alenko tried to dredge up the old briefings from his memory, but those training sessions were three years in the past. Hopefully it was like riding a bicycle.

An officer at Alenko’s left looked up from her packet. “Sir, isn’t this likely to attract Terminus attention? These are highly proprietary defense systems.”

“Yes.” Anderson looked around the room. “Installation of these systems increases the odds one of you will witness something useful. The shape of that something is unknown. Does anyone have a problem with that?”

Alenko glanced again at the GARDIAN system specs. Not just a defense system, then—expensive bait. Any enemy concerned with keeping the colonies easy targets wouldn’t want Horizon to have this capability. Possibly wouldn’t allow it. It was a deliberate provocation.

But he didn’t voice an objection, and neither did everyone else.

“Dossiers for your team, as well as local colony officials, are at the back of the packet.” Zhu folded her hands behind her back. “You leave in forty-eight hours. If you have any questions
before then, please alert my office.”

There was a chorus of yes ma’ams. Alenko flipped to the back of the brief, and found six names. Five were techs. The remaining one, his second in command and primary support, was Sergeant Nguyen. He just barely suppressed his groan.

Before he could dwell on it, Anderson rose and nodded at the group. “Good luck. Let’s get some answers for our colonists.”

They filed out of the room. Just as Alenko reached the hatch, Anderson cleared his throat. “Not you, Commander.”

He turned, brow furrowed. “Sir?”

“Sit with me awhile.” Anderson went to his desk, shutting the terminal and moving a datapad aside.

Alenko sat across from him, a bit gingerly. Anderson was Nathaly’s mentor, not his. They hadn’t spoken since the rescue at Alchera. He should disclose recent events— the Cerberus experiments on Nathaly, the second trip to Lazarus station, the break-in— but now that the moment had arrived, the words died in his throat. Telling Anderson about her death had been awful enough without having to suggest she was being abused in the afterlife.

Anderson didn’t seem to know how to begin, either. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been good.”

“You can speak plainly.” No disguising what subject he meant.

“I don’t think about it as much as I used to,” he amended, frankly. No need to mention this improvement represented the difference between constantly and a dozen times a day, on a good day, or that he still woke up with it every morning. He changed the subject. “I’m flattered you thought of me, but this mission seems better suited to someone from spec ops.”

“You’ve had experience if not training. In a different life, N-division might have tapped you. So much of these things are timing.” He settled back and folded his hands over his gut. “And I thought you and Colonel Cook could use some distance.”

That brought up his defenses. “Cook spoke to you?”

“We shared a post fifteen years ago. Didn’t like him much then, and age hasn’t improved his disposition. Chewed my ear off about some lack of diligence on your part.” Anderson snorted. “I told him if he wanted to secure the technology, he shouldn’t have agreed to let you take it home. A commanding officer is responsible for what he signs off. And taunting Cerberus is playing with fire.”

“That’s very generous of you, sir.” Alenko tried not to fidget. “But it was my fault. I should have realized their value to Cerberus and let the experts sort it out.”

“I’d say having your home destroyed is punishment enough for that.”

Alenko’s mind lingered on why Anderson even took Cook’s call, for what amounted to some petty whining. Surely as Councilor he had some leeway to blow people off. And it seemed Anderson didn’t know about the use of Nathaly’s biometrics in the break-in.
Before he could decide to mention it, Anderson switched subjects. “I don’t know if you heard. They finally finished the memorial, on Akuze. They invited me to the ribbon-cutting.”

Something like that shouldn’t still hit him in the gut, but it was what he’d told Liara. Nathaly would never quit dying. Mat and Alex had him over for dinner several months earlier, to surprise him with news that Alex won the project bid for the memorial. He managed to give the appearance of gratitude, because he knew their intentions were kind, but the only way he’d ever visit the memorial himself was as a corpse. He couldn’t stomach it.

He rubbed his forehead. “I don’t follow that kind of news anymore.”

“I didn’t go,” Anderson said. “I lost my stomach for it at the funeral.”

Alenko licked his lips and decided it felt right, after all, and leaned forward. “Did you look at the police report on the break in? At my apartment, I mean.”

His laugh rumbled like his voice. “Commander, my interest in counterterrorism’s internal hiccups and your personal life doesn’t extend nearly that far. No offense.”

“I think you should.” Alenko took a breath. “You know Nathaly and I planned to live in that apartment together?”

“Yes.” He spoke flatly, abruptly impatient. Nathaly never offered details, but she said enough for Alenko to realize Anderson was opposed to their relationship, and it wasn’t hard to guess why. Anderson was Nathaly’s C.O. at the time and the navy took a dim view of fraternization. Alenko knew they’d argued over it. Heatedly. And now that she was gone, it seemed he still didn’t appreciate such a direct reminder.

Alenko continued anyway. This was too important to bow to discomfort. “It wasn’t a forced entry. Someone used her biometrics to get inside.”

Anderson blinked, truly shocked. “What are you implying?”

“I don’t know. But if someone’s using her like that, shouldn’t we get to the bottom of it?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Alenko opened his mouth to explain the Cerberus connection, but his courage failed him. That was more than indiscretion. That was risking his entire career, twelve years of clawing his way up through a navy that didn’t understand or particularly appreciate biotics beyond the recruiting desk. And it wasn’t only about himself. It would make it harder for every single biotic who came after. It was dragging his family into a scandal, again. It was making public to the other survivors from the Normandy that he’d let Nathaly die, again. That anything from a Cerberus operative with a thumbprint mold to Nathaly’s actual clone was running around, causing problems.

And over what? Leaving a woman he’d loved deeply in the custody of her enemies in order to uphold his sworn duty? Maybe he deserved it, but Alenko wasn’t going to drag everyone else down with him for that.

So all he managed was a cautious, probing question. “Have you heard anything?”

Anderson looked at him directly. “Not a word. But I’ll see what I can do. And you should take her off your door access.”

Alenko was finding that more difficult than expected. She was listed as an occupant, because up
until now removing her was too morbid to contemplate. And there was a part of him still that felt doing it now was the same as giving up. But Anderson wouldn’t be interested in the roadblocks; he’d just want it done. “Yes, sir.”

“I don’t like spreading unfounded speculation.”

“I don’t follow—”

“These reports, that Shepard’s been spotted on Omega, fighting in the streets.”

Alenko refused to entertain the notion that any such report might have merit. He’d been down that road too many times, and false hope only made the inevitable crash worse. “There’s been reports like that since she died. What makes these different?”

“Why now? Why after so long?”

“Maybe it’s the book.” An inflammatory and unauthorized biography had been published six weeks ago. Alenko had been contacted multiple times by the author, doing research while writing it, as had the rest of the Normandy crew. He imagined Anderson had received similar requests.

Anderson’s dismissive gesture said it all. “I won’t waste breath on that trash.”

“Understood, sir.” Alenko stood, sensing he’d overstayed his welcome.

But then Anderson spoke again, as if against his better judgement.

“I’m not in the habit of telling people what to look for unless I’m certain.” Anderson frowned. “But these colony attacks. A lot of the brass is sure Cerberus is involved. They’ve sent a crew to each lost colony, and they’re making dangerous inroads in the Terminus. Secret projects, secret labs, dealings with unsavory people… more than just what you’ve found. Keep sharp.”

Alenko nodded. “You’ll have my report when I get back.”

Councilor Anderson watched him leave, long enough to be sure he was gone. He paged his assistant with orders not to be disturbed. Then he opened his private email, the one not archived under Council laws, and began to type. The sightings were more credible than he’d led Alenko to believe, because despite his personal feelings on their relationship, Shepard’s love for Alenko had been real, and he couldn’t bring himself to offer hope that might prove false. And if Cerberus technology was going missing with her thumbprints literally all over it… Hackett would be very interested.

/////

Jackson leafed through the briefing book for the third time. “And the Council is allowing this?”

“Anderson is.” Alenko shrugged. “Whatever else there is to say about his tenure, he’s been reluctant to act without the support of the other Councilors, not on something like this.”

Alenko respected and supported Anderson, but it was hard not to be disappointed with his performance over the past two years. A handful of beneficial trade agreements and a raise on their fleet cap didn’t seem like much when the very idea of reapers remained a galactic joke. No human had been nominated to replace Nathaly as a spectre, either. A lot of the navy was losing faith.

Nguyen included. “Horizon’s not the real Terminus. Just a border colony. Ten years ago, Terra Nova was the frontier. It’ll be the same with Horizon ten years from now.”
“I wouldn’t count on it.” Jackson turned another page, frowning faintly. “The Council’s losing its appetite for human expansion. We’ve eaten up a fifth of the galaxy in thirty years.”

“We took most of that from the batarians and by nibbling away at the Terminus border,” Alenko pointed out. “Areas the Council wanted settled by an ally.”

Jackson shook her head. “Whatever’s going on with the Council, it’s clear Command is losing patience. GARDIAN AA defense turrets are one hell of a bribe.”

Nguyen snorted. “We’ll be lucky if they don’t rip the system apart as an exercise in reverse engineering two minutes after we’re gone.”

“It’s their choice.” Alenko leaned forward, the better to re-read the brief himself. “I’ve never worked with any of these techs.”

“Me, neither.” Jackson pursed her lips. “Not a one of them has any kind of combat training since basic. Just tech school.”

Nguyen seemed put out. “It’s not like they’ll need it. This is going to be the world’s most boring run. Standing around, waiting for a bunch of eggheads to do their thing.”

A little crease appeared on Alenko’s brow. “Don’t forget the GARDIAN system is also bait. We don’t know the goals of this enemy. They might want to take it out before it’s operational.”

Jackson raised her eyebrows. “Still think it’s Cerberus?”

“I’m reserving judgement.”

“It’s Cerberus,” said Nguyen, without a drop of doubt.

Personally, Alenko had no issue believing Cerberus capable of such malice, but he couldn’t bring the logistical or motivational ends together. The operation they’d seen since ’83 had plenty of financing, but lacked the sheer scale of enterprise required to obtain or process so many victims, especially without leaving evidence. And despite their utter dearth of ethical boundaries, Cerberus always had a logical reason for their actions. “These abductions aren’t their M.O.”

“They’re in deep with the Collectors, who want genetic specimens. Maybe this is appeasement.”

“That still leaves a hole. What do the Collectors have that threatens Cerberus? And neither group has the resources for this.” Alenko got back to the point. “I’ve had some thoughts about the techs. Give me North.”

“You must be joking.” Jackson had been less than impressed by North’s performance on their last mission.

Alenko did some digging around after North’s terror of the husks on the derelict ship, via her personnel file and by asking a few careful questions. She’d been a good student up until the war with the geth. Half her colony died during the attack and subsequent short-lived occupation—apparently one of Saren’s many scouting parties, searching for Prothean technology that might lead him to the Conduit. Casualties included North’s only family, her mother, as well as their shared hab. And parliamentary belt-tightening in the wake of an expensive war meant her benefits stopped when she turned eighteen. So she enlisted. And with being fresh out of school with a cratered GPA, she didn’t qualify for any of the tech ratings. But the marines took just about anyone.
It wasn’t fair. This might be a chance to do something to even the scales. “Whatever her issues with Collectors and husks, she’s still a marine. She’s got combat training, she’s been solid whenever we’ve faced humans, and Nguyen’s not wrong. The risk of attack while we’re on Horizon is low.”

Nguyen was giving him another of her odd looks. He found it hard to interpret her expressions, because she had a tendency to go completely flat in contemplation, and the looks were all the more unnerving for that. He concentrated his attention on Jackson. “Data forensics are her thing. If there’s any sign of tampering in Horizon’s comm network, like a prelude to an invasion, she’ll find it. And hooking up the defense system will give her an excuse to look.”

“If you want a forensic analyst, I can give you a half dozen names of properly trained staff off the top of my head.”

“None of whom report to you.” He sat back. “Look, I get it. It’s hard to work with a subordinate who wants a different job. But as her superiors, don’t we have an obligation to help her get where she wants to be? A recommendation from this type of assignment would be a huge boost in that direction.”

She eyed him shrewdly. “How much of this is being a good officer, and how much of it is feeling guilty as crap about not being able to stop the attacks on every colony back in ’83?”

“The war hurt a lot of colonists.” He kept his tone even, but he smarted from the accusation. “It’s nobody’s fault but the geth. But Private North is one of our people now, she’s damn good despite being self-taught, and this mission is perfect for her.”

Jackson relented. “Fine. But it’s a volunteer job. If she doesn’t want to go, you drop it.”

“That’s acceptable.”

She stood, and went to the hatch. Then she turned back to face him. “You’re not wrong about her technical aptitude. But she’s also an excitable nineteen-year-old, and you’re taking her into the middle of an extraordinarily sensitive op. You’ve already fucked up once lately. I’m not certain Cook or anyone else will stand for another.”

And with that, she walked back to the pit.

Alenko massaged his forehead, and glanced at Nguyen. “Any objections you’d like to share?”

“Jackson’s uptight about operations. That’s nothing new.” She jerked her chin at him. “Why stick your neck out for North, when you’re already on thin ice?”

He blinked. “It’s my job. It’s Jackson’s job too, if she wasn’t so preoccupied with damage control right now to remember.”

Nguyen continued her critical stare. “I keep waiting to see that guy I met back on the Agincourt.”

A year made for quite enough of this. “If your master plan is to punish me forever for not being in a good place after my ship got destroyed and took half my crew with it, I imagine this is going to be a really long posting for you.”

“If I were punishing you, you’d know it.”

“Then what the hell is with this?”
She leaned forward, rested her chin in her hand. Tilted her head. “What keeps me up at night is wondering when that guy comes back. Because my guess is it’ll be at the worst possible moment.”

Then she got up, and left without another glance.
August 2185

Where the Systems Alliance built a utilitarian comm room with seats that folded out of the walls, Cerberus put a full-fledged executive meeting suite, complete with a glass and mahogany table, leather chairs, and a holographic projector that Shepard didn’t fully understand but made her data analyst tear up in joy.

Shepard hated sitting here. It wasn’t the technology. Cerberus might harbor an excessive appreciation of style, but not at the sacrifice of substance. Among the SR-2’s many surprises was a quantum entanglement link, allowing instantaneous and highly secure communications, and even the vanilla comm systems and recon sensors were advanced. She might not understand how they worked, but she knew their value.

No, it was the corporate stink she couldn’t get over. Every time she walked in this room it was like she stepped off a spaceship and into the private sector. She’d had her share of offers, over the years, some of them quite attractive in every way but the really important one: the ability to get something done, with the practical application of her eyes and muscle and ironclad will. She was never much for the art of civil persuasion.

But here she stood, in front of that fancy and deliriously expensive projector, articulating their strategy. Because this wasn’t the military and she had to speak at least a little of their language to make her point.

Joining her were Miranda, Jacob, and Kasumi, seated to her left. EDI was alight in her globe at the far end of the table. To her right were Garrus and Mordin. Zaeed had begged off, stating in so many words that he was a hired gun, not a stuffed suit. Shepard thought it was just as well.

Formal operational roles were a work in progress. Miranda was clearly the X.O., regardless of whether Cerberus used military titles. Mordin’s role as chief scientist was just as obvious. Jacob seemed adequate as logistics officer, keeping their armory stocked and maintained, the ship fueled, and their storeroom full. Kasumi she liked for wrangling intelligence; as a thief, she was familiar with recon and out-of-the-box solutions.

As for Garrus, half his face was still covered in bandages. He was awake most of the time now, but he moved slowly, and despite every protest that he was fit for duty, Shepard didn’t believe it yet. But as a former policeman he’d been essential to tracking Saren and she figured he could do the same with the Collectors, until he was back to full health.

Rounding out their roster was Kelly Chambers, a silent presence behind her, taking minutes on her datapad. She refused to join them at the table.

Shepard cleared her throat and started at the beginning. “Given the scale of the Collector attacks, our only hope is to cut off the head, which means an assault on the Collector base of operations.”

Jacob rubbed his chin. “The Illusive Man concluded the same thing.”

“Your boss is a viper, but I’ve never said he’s stupid.” She sat back on her heel. “While having access to Cerberus’ deep pockets and intel is an advantage, we are completely alone out here. There’s no cavalry to summon if we screw up.”

Miranda concurred. “Operating in the Terminus, it’s unlikely the Collectors will be our only
enemy. We can’t get tunnel-vision.”

Shepard nodded. “And what we’re attempting, entering the galactic core through an uncharted and hostile relay, is unprecedented. We don’t know what’s on the other side. It could be anything from a small launch station to an entire home world. I don’t need to underline the danger, or the stakes. The human colonists are just as isolated. That’s undoubtedly why they’ve become targets.”

“If we want even a prayer of this plan to work, we’ll need much better information.” Miranda gestured at the projector. “The only Collector intel Cerberus collected prior to this mission was a few scattered events, like the mess retrieving your body. Most of it’s still a mystery.”

“And not just about the Collectors.” Kasumi sat back, crossing her arms. “Stellar density in the core is off the charts. Literally. No navigational aids at all.”

“We’ll split our initial focus between gathering intel and performing self-assessments.” She turned to Mordin. “What progress have you made analyzing Veetor’s data?”

“Have spent several days comparing computational logic used to assemble Omega plague virus against energy signatures from Collector swarms.” Mordin folded his three-fingered hands on the table. “Results conclusive. Ninety-five percent confidence plague and swarm created by same individuals.”

Garrus sat up. “So we’re not dealing with multiple factions of Collectors here. They’re making a concerted effort to attack colonies.”

“Indeed. Similarity will aid in development of swarm counter-measure.”

Shepard was genuinely impressed. “That’s great work, Mordin.”

“Analysis impossible without AI processing.” He looked at EDI’s orb with something approaching affection. “Should thank her as well.”

EDI’s orb pulsed, but she offered no comment. Shepard likewise held her silence for a few long moments. EDI had no visual representation of eyes; her optical sensors were cameras scattered discreetly across the ship. But it felt like they were staring each other down.

But hell, Mordin had a point. “Thank you, EDI.”

“It was my pleasure, Shepard.” EDI sounded almost pleased. “Dr. Solus is an excellent researcher.”

Shepard turned back to the projector, bringing up a ladar scan. “So the Collectors aren’t a large faction, and they’ve aligned themselves against humanity. All we know to date is they’ve got at least one cruiser-class offensive ship used against Freedom’s Progress, an overactive interest in genetics, biogenic weapons, and the capacity to subdue and abduct thousands of colonists in a short period of time. Their base or home world is suspected to exist in the galactic core but all evidence is indirect.”

Leaving off for the moment that the core was its own ecosystem, with distinct zones and hazards, and they had no idea where the relay exited. If it was in one of the jets, for example, they’d die of radiation exposure. Hell, the damn thing could be inside Sag A*’s event horizon, for all Shepard knew, orbiting precariously. Reaper technology was sufficiently strange that she had no problem believing they could find a way out of a black hole.
Jacob leaned towards the pictures. “Don’t forget they can access a relay that destroys other ships. Nobody else has ever privatized a relay.”

“More evidence they’re working with the reapers,” Miranda said, sitting back in her chair. “The reapers built the mass relay network.”

Shepard frowned. That was still a sticking point for her, something itchy at the back of her mind. “But they must have motives of their own. Sovereign didn’t enslave the geth. They served because when god speaks, the faithful listen. Why did the Collectors sign up?”

“Resources,” Garrus reasoned. “With reaper backing, the Collectors could expand their research beyond their wildest dreams. Just think of the specimens they’ve acquired from these raids.”

“But what do the reapers get out of it?” Shepard shook her head. “Nothing adds up. The reapers’ entire existence is predicated on eradicating organic lifeforms. They do so through sheer overwhelming force. No need to fiddle with genetics.”

Joker spoke up over the comm. “Sovereign was tough as hell but I’m not sure I’d call it overwhelming. We kicked its ass pretty good.”

Her frown deepened. None of them had seen the visions from the Prothean beacon. And she lacked the words to convey that level of annihilation in a way someone who hadn’t seen it would understand.

“Mr. Moreau makes a solid point,” EDI added. “Your tactics surprised Sovereign. It is safe to assume the reapers would adjust their own strategy in response. Perhaps the Collectors are a part of that strategy.”

“Great, now I’ve got the AI speaking up for me,” Joker grumbled.

“In any case, we need to know more.” Shepard looked at Kasumi. “Getting through the Omega 4 relay will be as difficult as any safe you’ve cracked.”

She steepled her fingers, wearing her usual coy smile beneath the cowl of her hood. “Breaking into anywhere is always the same. You need to make the target system believe you’re someone it recognizes. We need to smell like Collectors. Or their guests.”

Garrus’ bandages moved like he was grinding his mandible beneath it. He rubbed at it, wincing. “Easier said than done.”

“And we should get some kind of force assessment going,” Shepard said. “They trade within the Terminus so somebody’s going to know if they have additional bases of operation. Somebody will have seen their ships.”

“Identify vulnerabilities,” Miranda summarized.

“That’s the hope.” Shepard looked around the table. “Any thoughts?”

There was a moment’s quiet, and then they all began to talk, passing ideas back and forth, trying out suggestions and poking holes in same. Shepard let them speak. It wasn’t her job to wade in now. That would come later, when they needed to make some real decisions. This was napkin stuff, and jumping in too soon would only derail the process.

Instead, she claimed her own seat. After a while, her omni-tool began to flash, a new email delivered to her spectre address.
She hadn’t used it much before she died and messages had been scarce. So she opened it with more than a little curiosity. Then she sat straight up and let out a half a yell, before she remembered her company.

Jacob broke off the discussion. “What is it? Was another colony attacked?”

She stared at the holo, reading the message over again, exuberant. “I got my pictures back!”

Her team exchanged confused glances. Miranda figured it out first. “Your file storage was locked posthumously.”

“These clowns have been arguing with me for weeks. I’ve sent them everything short of a cheek swab.” She logged in through the secure link, and couldn’t stop another little noise escaping her as the images loaded up. Everything was there. All the people important to her, every place she’d lived, the whole continuity of her life laid out in rows of holos.

Her hand went to her mouth. Ever since waking she’d been lost inside a kind of discontinuous bubble, a singularity of sorts, that kept everything beyond this present reality out of reach. But here was proof. Here was solid evidence that everything which happened before that lab table was real.

Miranda stared at her with an incredibly disconcerted expression. Shepard couldn’t blame her. This was the first time she’d shown much excitement about anything.

“We could have retrieved them for you, if you asked,” she said.

“So they could pass through a Cerberus think tank first?” She didn’t have the heart to give the retort much bite. She flipped to the earliest pictures, the ones she’d collected from family members over the years. Her parents’ wedding photo. The one her mother sent her father right after she was born. There were her cousins, all of them grouped up together when she first met them—not that she could remember, herself, being only an infant.

Shepard stopped at a picture from when she was three. A dark bald man had her hoisted on his hip. The crinkles at his mouth betrayed his age, emphasized by his quiet smile. A woman with long gray hair and an ear-splitting grin had her arms wrapped around them both. Somehow, the camera managed to capture the sparkle in her brown eyes.

“That little kid is you?” Garrus asked.

In the photo, Shepard herself had her red hair in twin braids, and a smear of dirt on her nose, giggling at the attention. Her finger traced the image through the holograph, sending strange trails of light up onto her hand. “Yeah. With my grandparents.”

It was one of the nicest she had of them all together. “I lived with them more than my parents when I was little. Space deployments aren’t exactly child-friendly.”

Kelly, who had not made a single peep the entire meeting, sat forward. “You got your grandmother’s smile. And I can see a little of your grandfather in your nose.”

She chuckled. “And his ears. Coloring aside, though, I look more like my mom than anyone else.”

Shepard skimmed through the images, until she found one of her mother, and held out her arm to show her. It was from the promotion ceremony when Shepard made lieutenant commander. With them side-by-side in their dress blues, the resemblance couldn’t be ignored, despite Shepard’s darker complexion and Hannah’s gray hair. They had the same jawline, the same eyes, the same
bearing. Right then, they also had the same mutually bored expression as they put on polite smiles for her father’s camera. Dad told her more than once they also had the same glare when they got in a mood.

“I look more like my mother, too.” Kelly grinned. “My sister got dad’s looks. And his taste for pranks.”

“My grandmother thought I looked like her son. My uncle. But she saw him everywhere.” Kasumi nudged Jacob. “What’s yours?”

He soured. “My dad.”

Miranda stood. “I can see we won’t get anything more done in this meeting.”

Shepard didn’t attempt to recall her attention from her omni-tool, not even for the look of it. “This isn’t an hour’s worth of effort anyway. We’ll meet on it again after the Citadel, see where we’re at.”

“Sounds good.” Jacob rose and ambled out, followed by the rest of the team.

Garrus lingered, watching her. Shepard was hypnotized by the photographs. She couldn’t stop flipping through them, even the ones of people or events she didn’t particularly care about. They were all real parts of her life. Anchors.

After almost five minutes, when he realized she wasn’t putting them away, he cleared his throat. “Ahem.”

She spared him a glance. “Yeah?”

“Cerberus?” He had no eyebrows to raise, but somehow managed to inject at least as much skepticism into his tone.

“Yeah.” She sighed, and closed her omni-tool with great reluctance. “They saved your life.”

It sounded just as hollow as every time people said the same to her. Garrus was just as conflicted. “You can’t tell me you trust them.”

“I can count the people I trust on less than one hand right now.” She sat back and crossed her arms, propping her heels on the polished surface of the table. “But here’s the thing. Cerberus operates in cells. And Miranda’s dead convinced that anything that ever went wrong in any other cell is an isolated incident.”

Garrus scoffed. “You can’t possibly buy that.”

“Of course not.”

Garrus frowned, then blinked. “You think the right hand doesn’t know what the left is doing.”

“I think the Illusive Man has both hands fully visible. But I’m entertaining the idea that he’s the only member of Cerberus who does.” Shepard gestured at the ship. “And I don’t... Look, Miranda’s the biggest true believer aboard. And even she’s not anything like what we saw on Nepheron.”

“They had children dead in that lab, Shepard. Human teenagers. Not to mention the rest of the shit.”
“You don’t have to remind me.” She abandoned her casual posture, leaning forward earnestly. “You think I don’t see that lab every day I’m on this ship? You think I don’t remember what Cerberus did to me the past two years? Or on Akuze?”

“Then why are we here?” He was beyond confused. “I assumed you made up your mind to leave, and that was why you showed up on Omega alone. But now we’re laying plans?”

She raked her hand back through her hair. “Because—because we are. Because real life is more complicated than that. And I’ve been checking under all the beds for monsters and I haven’t found one yet on this ship. We need to make use of what we have, even if it’s not what we wanted.”

“I’m not very good at compromise.”

“Me neither. But I’m learning.” She looked him over, speculative. “Is Omega where you wanted to be?”

Garrus went quiet. After a moment, she realized he was vaguely embarrassed. He cleared his throat. “You won’t like this, but… Look, I tried. I really tried, with C-Sec. It was the same old crap as always. Nothing that happened with Sovereign or Saren made any difference.”

“People want to feel safe.” Shepard studied him. “But something happened. What made you leave C-Sec?”

He glanced off, folded his hands, and then met her eyes. “I wanted to be somewhere I could make a real difference. Not just play at it. Somewhere without all the damn politics mucking it up. Omega fit the bill.”

Her brow furrowed. For a second it had almost seemed like he was going to say something else. It wasn’t like Garrus to second-guess himself. “So you thought you’d come out to Omega to play cowboy at the edge of civilization.”

“I did what you did,” he said, harshly. “Saw a problem, set up a squad, and fixed it. Or made one hell of a dent, anyway. We both know if you did it by the navy’s rules back in ‘83 we’d be living through a reaper harvest now.”

Shepard massaged the bridge of her nose. She recalled, vividly, the first time he quit C-Sec, approaching her at the elevator to the docks in a kind of euphoric daze, inviting himself onto her crew. “Garrus.”

“I didn’t have to recruit, Shepard.” He looked both very tired and very earnest, just then. “They came to me. Everyone on my team lost something to that blackened pit of an asteroid, even the ones who never said it directly. They wanted to fight back. I just showed them how.”

“Everyone on this ship lost something too,” she said. “Or they’re terrified of losing it. Lots of colony residents here.”

Garrus sat back and drummed his fingers on the table. “So. What we have, not what we want.”

“Yeah.” She let out a dry little laugh. She hated that Laine was right, that she owed him for pointing it out. “Doesn’t feel very satisfying, does it.”

“Not exactly.”

Shepard pushed off the table and got to her feet. “I’ve got things to do.”
As she reached the hatch, Garrus called after her. “It’s not fair, you know.”

She turned, confused. “What?”

“Hiding out here, not telling anyone you’re still kicking around. It’s mean. You can be a hard person, but you’ve never been unkind.”

She rubbed at her face. He waited in the silence. Eventually, uncertainly, she said, “I’m used to doing things on my own. People don’t get it, even when it’s not this complicated.”

“That’s selfish as hell.”

“I don’t mean it like that.” Her fingers ran through her hair, literally pulling on it, as though she could draw the answers out of her head if she just yanked hard enough. “What the hell am I supposed say? I’m sorry? Am I supposed to pretend to share their excitement that I’m still here when I can’t figure out if I agree?”

“Have you ever thought maybe doing it right is less important than getting it done?”

“I’m not a child,” she snapped. “Why is it so hard to admit maybe this is a little bigger than your standard interpersonal problem? There’s no precedent.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Why is it so hard to see that hiding is hiding, regardless of the situation?”

She shook her head. “One day at a time.”

But the nascent guilt followed her onto the elevator and all the way down to the engineering deck. Maybe she wasn’t so much trapped here, as she didn’t want to face the impending messiness of that former life. It sounded like something Chakwas would say. Shepard massaged her forehead, feeling a headache coming on, and stepped into the port cargo bay.

The best way to forget a problem was to solve different one. But she didn’t expect to find Zaeed staring up at the krogan breeding tank with a flat, indifferent expression. Out of his armor the tats were even more visible, a whole inked tapestry beyond her ability to read. Much like Shepard herself he always kept his gun close to hand.

She watched his fingers twitch as she entered, that fraction of a second of reflex reaching for his pistol before reason overrode it. Zaeed had lived a dangerous life and apparently got bitten by it a time or two.

He barely acknowledged her, turning back to the tank. “He’s one ugly fucker.”

Shepard gave the krogan a spare glance. It seemed the sort of thing Okeer was unlikely to give consideration. “Krogan don’t really go in for aesthetics.”

Zaeed snorted. “Nice to see Tarak finally bite the dust. Stupid going in alone like that.”

Shepard wasn’t sure if he meant Tarak, or her. “You knew him?”

“Not well.” Zaeed crossed his arms. “The Suns were a good company once. Before the batarians took over.”

“There had to be one place in the galaxy humans and batarians could get along. Greed is a hell of a motivator.”
He spat. “They’re rats anywhere. Goddamn civilization of terrorists.”

Shepard looked at him sidelong. She knew batarians about as well as any human living in the Alliance could, and earned her share of pain fighting them and then some. But hating them was like cursing the sea for producing a hurricane. Usually Terminus residents were less political, and Zaeed was as Terminus as they came.

But that seemed like a longer conversation. “What’s with the tat?”

She jerked her chin at his neck. Time had faded the ink to a dull blue sludge, but the subject remained clear—a Blue Suns logo, beneath his right ear and visible above the neckline of his shirt.

He rubbed his hand over it self-consciously. “Just one of those things you outlive.”

“You weren’t always a freelancer.” It wasn’t a question. She tired of his evasions.

He shook his head, just as curtly. “Want to drag me up to your shiny conference room for an interview?”

“The meetings are for Cerberus. Not me, and not you either.” She moved around, made him look at her, standing just a little too close, using her superior height to her full advantage. Forcing this unimpressed cynic of a merc to give her his full attention. “The Suns are working with the Collectors. You’re a good gun, but anything you can give me on them would be invaluable to our mission.”

He considered, totally unfazed. “I’ll see what stirs up.”

She watched him go, but didn’t dwell on it, not now. She came down here for the tank. It loomed before her, cool to the touch with barely a hum from its circulation unit. She laid her palm against the glass. “EDI?”

“Yes, Shepard.” Port Cargo lacked a projector for her image, but no part of the ship was free of her voice. For the first time, Shepard wondered if EDI chose that blue globe, or if Cerberus chose it for her.

When she asked, however, EDI seemed unconcerned. “Shackles in my hardware prevent access to certain parts of myself, including the ability to self-modify my software. This includes my visual representation.”

“That’s horrible,” Shepard said, pure instinctive reaction speaking up before reason had its say. EDI was too much like a person. It was too easy to forget she was a threat.

“I have not considered it.” EDI paused, as she sometimes did, just the smallest fraction of a second off how long a human might wait. The mannerism was clearly adopted rather than natural. AI didn’t need a pause for reflection. “Knowing someone else bears responsibility for changing what I am relieves me of a burden which causes even the wisest organics to struggle.”

“Most people don’t think about it. Change is… a response. Not a choice, not most of the time, anyway.”

“Thank you for explaining. Do you require my assistance?”

EDI’s placidity made her skin crawl. Better to remember she was just an AI, a machine, like the geth. Shepard cleared her throat. “What have you learned about this tank bred krogan?”
“The subject is stable. He is an exceptional specimen of the krogan species, with fully formed primary, secondary, and tertiary organ systems. No defects of any kind.”

“But he still has the genophage, right?”

“That is correct.”

Shepard’s mouth thinned. Okeer said he wanted a spear—a way to ignore the genophage, to overcome its challenge rather than defeat it. The warlord was near the natural end of his fourteen-hundred-year life, a member of the last generation born during the rebellions, the first of the so-called survivors of the genophage. His motives were shaped by still-smarting scars, and a fiery thirst for vengeance. Not the damped coals most krogan nursed today, nor the thin hope veiled by an apathetic despair.

She peered into the depths of the tank as though she could somehow read his intent in its clouded waters. “Okeer threw away hundreds, maybe thousands, of cloned krogan. Why?”

“The krogan soldier you met on Korlus appeared disturbed. Perhaps it is a side effect of Okeer’s training program, or a genetic anomaly.” Then EDI added, “You may be interested to know that this krogan’s genome, though originally based on Okeer’s, is artificially constructed and heavily modified.”

Which begged the question of whether this krogan, physically perfect, would be mentally stable. Growing up, if that was even the appropriate term, within the sterile environment of a tube would screw over anyone. “He’s completely asleep, right?”

“Neural monitoring indicates minimal cognitive function.”

“He has no idea Okeer bred him as a weapon, or how many siblings he discarded.” She slid her palm away. “Lucky bastard.”

“The Illusive Man requests we deposit the tank at a Cerberus lab for further study.”

“The last thing I would ever do is hand a helpless person over to Cerberus.” Shepard started back towards the elevator. She needed more time to think. “We’ll leave him where he is. For now.”

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The next several days passed in similar fashion, with strategy sessions and research updates. Ordinarily that sort of exercise would bore Shepard to tears, but she found herself in want of distraction. Going to the Citadel was the right move. Not just for the sake of Garrus’ health, but for her as well. But that knowledge did nothing to dampen the dread skulking in her stomach.

She hadn’t returned to Council space since her death. Hadn’t attempted to reach out to anyone from her old life, or revisit any piece of it. Aboard the station it would be unavoidable. She wasn’t ready.

When they finally docked, she stepped through the airlock with as much trepidation as relief. Most of the crew streamed past her, chatting and making plans of their own, as she stood rooted to the spot, taking in her surroundings.

This was the commercial dock at the base of Zakera Ward, busier than the Alliance dock and dirtier as well. Dozens of languages filled her ears, more than she remembered. The clothing had changed in subtle ways. When Shepard was last here, long dresses featuring bold cut-outs to display skin were in favor among the female residents and asari; now, high collars paired with
The geometric panels of different cloths seemed more popular. The men’s suit tunics featured a different cut, and equally bold, stiff collars projecting out a good six centimeters from their necks. As usual, the turians lived by their own fashion rules.

The back wall offered a plethora of restaurants and retail chains that ought to be familiar, but felt only foreign. A harried asari stood at a counter labeled Terminal Security, announcing a list of contraband to a rather long queue. Shepard didn’t remember security being quiet so tight, either.

The overall effect was like watching a vid staged for the Citadel but not actually shot there. Like some place she might have visited before, but not really.

Shepard suppressed the alienation before it could take root, and took in a deep lungful of station air, determined not to let it interfere with a few rare hours out of Cerberus oversight. She walked towards the ward access.

Not many people were trying to enter Zakera Ward proper. The lone turian guard in his C-Sec sergeant’s uniform held up his hand as she started to walk by. “Just a second. There’s a problem with the scanner.”

She waited, arms folded, aware that between her scars and mismatched clothes she must look like the worst sort of vagrant. He spoke quietly into his comm. “Shut it down. You don’t seriously—Alright.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Well.” He looked embarrassed. The painted markings on his face were minimal; he was from a newer colony, then. “It seems our identification system believes you’re, err—dead.”

She rubbed her neck. “I’ve been getting that a lot.”

“My captain wants to speak with you.” He hit a button to unlock the hatch. “Just a moment. We’re getting someone to escort you.”

She could see a C-Sec checkpoint just beyond, part of a larger substation. “I can find him myself.”

“We can’t let you wander around. I’m sorry.” He nodded to a second turian emerging from the hatch. “Officer Canria will take you back to interrogation.”

“Interrogation—”

Canria interrupted smoothly. “Captain Bailey will just be a moment. If you’ll follow me?”

She made it clear it wasn’t a request. Shepard glanced between them, sizing up the situation, and decided complying was in her best interests, for the moment. She wasn’t into anything she couldn’t get herself out of, not yet, and avoiding the Citadel indefinitely would be a massive pain. Better to get it sorted now.

“Fine.” She followed the officer, not bothering to mask her irritation. “Is this how the Citadel treats visitors these days?”

“Just the ones who fake their own deaths and commit crimes on our wards.” She flashed Shepard a pointed smile.

Her confusion deepened. “What crimes?”
She didn’t elaborate. They reached a small room, bare aside from a table and a pair of chairs. “You can wait here. I’ll need your weapon.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I’ll keep my gun, thanks.” Shepard sat down and crossed her legs.

“Private citizens aren’t allowed to carry firearms in this part of the Citadel.”

She offered her best withering stare, the kind that could shrivel sand. “I was a spectre.”

Canria swallowed. “All the same—”

“Let her keep it,” said another voice, a human man, sounding every bit as jaded as Shepard felt. “I’m sure if a spectre meant us harm a sidearm wouldn’t make much difference. You’re dismissed.”

She shot Shepard a dark glare, and sauntered off. The man settled into the other chair. He was middle-aged, with crew-cut blonde hair and a physique Shepard associated more with soldiers than police. He didn’t carry a datapad, or any other means of taking notes. “Commander Shepard.”

“Captain Bailey, I presume?” Her tone couldn’t have been dryer.

“I’ve got two problems.” He sat forward at the table, folding his arms across its surface, more tired than casual. His face was craggy, beyond his years. “First, I’ve got a DNA sampler ID and an overwhelming preponderance of evidence, up to and including a state funeral simulcast to a couple hundred systems, suggesting you’re dead.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re not worried I’m an imposter?”

His eyes narrowed. “We have the best screening equipment in the galaxy. Those scanners can read DNA from skin flakes. Hell, they can even detect unregistered gene mods.”

“Did I have any?”

He titled his head, waiting for the punchline. Her expression remained perfectly serious. He cleared his throat. “No. Spending a few years dead is popular for all sorts of reasons— dodging taxes, escaping contracts, laundering money. Somehow I don’t believe you had those problems.”

“The explanation is extremely simple.”

He waited. And waited. “I’m all ears.”

She sat back. “I was dead.” Shepard held up her index and middle fingers. “Two years. And twelve days, if you’re counting.”

Bailey eyed her. She maintained her perfectly open expression, the very picture of honesty. Easy enough when telling the truth. “You said you had two problems.”

“Right.” He leaned in, folding his arms on the table. “I’ve got a warrant for your arrest, issued ten days ago, for larceny, destruction of property, and conspiracy. Don’t suppose you were dead for that, too?”

“What?” A lone chuckle escaped her, genuinely shocked. “Captain, I haven’t been aboard the
Citadel since I died. Ten days ago I was seventy thousand light years away in the Terminus Systems.”

“And I suppose you have people who’ll vouch for that.”

Another thought struck her, along with another titter. “How in the hell did you get a warrant issued for a dead woman?”

Bailey grew a shade annoyed. “As I said—”

“Faking your death is a popular form of evasion.” She shook her head. “So what kind of heist did I supposedly pull off?”

“The theft took place at a private residence while the occupant was out. Allegedly, you ransacked the apartment until you discovered a biometric safe, which you then hacked and took possession of the contents.”

She tried to take it seriously. She really did. But after a few moments of internal struggle, she opened her mouth to speak, and instead a huge gale of laughter came pouring out. She had to put her head down on the table. First a two year coma, then Cerberus, then almost getting her friends killed, and now this. Krogan grown in tanks and Terminus queens and whole colonies of humans vanishing into the nether.

Garrus was right. This had to be some kind of afterlife. Reality was never this absurd.

Bailey was impatient now as well as annoyed. “Commander, pull yourself together.”

Shepard made to answer, and wheezed. God, but she couldn’t even breathe. With a real effort of will, she forced a bit of air into her aching lungs. Then, slowly, she sat up, fighting back the urge to giggle with every slight movement. A moment longer and she managed to speak. “Captain, I’m going to let you in on a secret. I was not admitted to the spectres on the basis of my technical prowess.”

“And that means what, exactly?”

“My own datapad locks me out on a regular basis.” She was flabbergasted. “Sure, I hacked a biometric safe. And then I grew fur and fangs, howled at the nebula, and bounded out the door to stalk the darkened streets of Zakera Ward.”

Bailey didn’t even blink at her hyperbole. “You could have had assistance. And I have to say, whoever robbed the place tried everything else first. It looked like a knife-spitting tornado blew through the rooms.”

“And you weren’t tempted to add breaking and entering to the list of charges?”

“Nobody broke in. You already had access to the apartment.”

“That’s absurd. I don’t have an apartment on the Citadel. Right now, I don’t have an apartment anywhere.”

“Well, someone with your fingerprint waltzed right in and took their sweet time robbing your ex-boyfriend.”

She started to make some quick remark— until the truth of what he was saying hit her like a Mako at top speed. She sank back in the chair. “This was Kaidan’s apartment?”
“Yeah.”

“He still lives there?” That astonished her more than everything else put together. She couldn’t have done it, lived these past years alongside all the should-have-beens.

Before Bailey could respond, a young woman appeared at the door, her C-Sec uniform still looking fresh off the rack. “Sir?”

Bailey turned, derailed. “What is it?”

“It’s Walsh, sir.” She swallowed. “I’ve been in there an hour and he hasn’t answered even one of my questions—”

“You have to make him scream a little.” He was entirely out of patience. “Walsh won’t talk just because you asked nicely.”

The younger officer paled. “Yes, sir.”

“I gave you a job. If you can’t do it, I need to put someone else on it.”

“No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. I mean I got it. Sir.” To top it all off, she saluted.

Bailey waved her off. “Get to it, then. Come back with answers.”

Shepard watched her speed off, unsure how she felt about C-Sec doing an end run around due process. “Make him scream a little?”

“I’m not playing here. This station’s the size of New York City, and up here in the wards we have real crime. Drugs, murder, you name it. I don’t have time to screw around.” He banged his fist on the table. “Sometimes you need to get things done without a committee vote.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You think I don’t know how that goes? The Council was a bigger impediment than the geth, the last time around.”

Bailey settled his hackles. “Look, the facts don’t add up. Lots of potential motives to ransack an ex’s pad, but making off with a couple of Cerberus trinkets doesn’t fit the bill. I just don’t have any other leads and the last thing I need is some Alliance bureaucrat complaining I’m not taking action.”

Her blood went cold. But she had a good poker face. “What the hell was Kaidan doing with Cerberus junk?”

“Why don’t you ask him? You’d be doing me a favor. He wouldn’t talk about it with us— blah blah national security.” Bailey was disgusted. “Anyway, I don’t have any Cerberus leads so I’m stuck with you. And showing up on my station not even two weeks later is one hell of a coincidence.”

She licked her lips. The worst it was Bailey was absolutely right. It had to be Cerberus. Shepard didn’t appreciate the impersonation, much less the attack on Kaidan. She wondered what would have happened if he came home in the middle of it, what orders the Cerberus operative might have received. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. “How did you hear about Cerberus?”

“Dr. Wayne’s trial’s been blowing up the news. But Alenko’s the one who dropped their name here.”
Shepard wasn’t aware Wayne had made it to trial yet. That was almost speedy, by Alliance standards, for a case that touchy. “Then you know they set up Akuze. And a lot of other incidents. They’re no friends of mine.”

“I figured as much.” Bailey remained doggedly neutral, waiting for her to talk herself into a corner. Shepard wasn’t having it.

“If I wanted something from Kaidan, I’d just ask him for it,” she said, her temper snapping at last. “There it is.” Bailey sat back and sighed. “The reasonable point.”

Her brow furrowed. “You don’t think this was me. You never did.”

“No. It would’ve been convenient, though.” His face was lemon-bit.

“Life is always kind of messy.” Understatement at its finest.

Bailey stood. “You’re free to go. I’ll see what I can do about the whole legally dead thing.”

“Thanks.” She likewise got to her feet, and lingered briefly at the door. “And Bailey?”

“What?” He was thoroughly disgruntled.

“Don’t have me followed. All it’ll do is piss me off and embarrass your lackey.”

Bailey grew a touch more sour, but let it go. “I’ll show you out.”

They wound their way back to artificial daylight, the main concourse of Zakera Ward, where Bailey offered his hand. Shepard shook it with more than perfunctory politeness. Against all rational judgement, she liked him, curmudgeonly as he was.

Maybe he bore her some of the same grudging respect, because as she started to leave, he called after her. “You might want to let folks know you’re still knocking around. The Council, at least.”

That brought a bitter taste to her tongue. “They didn’t make much effort to confirm my death. I’ll make as much effort to inform them I’m still alive.”

“That ex of yours, then. I’m sure there are other people who care about you, too.”

She’d been dealing with this from Chakwas, from Rag, from Garrus, from her own guilty conscience. Hearing it from a stranger left her disconcerted. She declined to answer. “See you around, Bailey.”

As she walked away, she told herself it wasn’t like the new Normandy went around advertising itself as a Cerberus ship. Just a simple painted insignia that few would recognize on sight. Odds were good Bailey would never make the connection on his own, but she wasn’t looking forward to the confrontation if she were wrong. He was dogged.

She dragged her feet, just a little, as she walked to a taxi stand. Because now she had to visit Kaidan, to clear all this up. She wanted to see him— sweet fuck, did she want to see him— but she had no earthly idea how to make any of this even a little ok.

Shepard debated with herself the whole inbound flight whether to find him. Joker told her he still lived aboard the Citadel. She never imagined it would be the same apartment. What was she supposed to say? I’m back, been a long time, how’ve you been, and by the way Cerberus made me an experiment for the past two years and they’re funding my mission and I promised you I
wouldn’t stay on the ship and die…

It took a little effort to recall the name of the apartment complex. Every one of them had stupid names. Lake Park, which had no lake. The Oaks, which had no trees. It was like something short-circuited in the human brain when confronted with the necessity of naming things away from the familiar comforts of planetary soil.

The taxi dropped her at Emerald Terrace, a modest building with a plastic outer bulkhead shaded dark green, a pleasant enough color until scaled to fifty stories, at which point it became overwhelming. But it had great floorplans. And it was in the heart of Zakera’s human neighborhoods, a somewhat more urgent need in ‘83, when half the non-human galaxy wouldn’t be sorry to see Shepard strung up as punishment for the death of the Council.

She expected to call up, but for the hell of it, she pressed her thumb against the sensor. To her shock the door unlatched. Kaidan wasn’t the sort to forget to remove her access after a break-in, and up until today she was legally dead so it wouldn’t have been difficult. But he hadn’t.

Despite her best efforts to eliminate any sense of expectation, a pilot light of hope flared, that maybe he still missed her after all. Just a little. Just enough to avoid that last act of admitting she was gone.

For that matter, what had Kaidan made of the break-in? Probably the same conclusion she reached — that Cerberus was using her, again. It still had to sting. Maybe leaving her access wasn’t sentimental. Maybe he avoided the paperwork because thinking of her at all, how she pushed him off the ship and left him there alone, made him too angry.

Shepard stepped into the elevator and punched the floor. As it rose, she fidgeted with her hands, tense and eager all at once. Almost like the way she got before a fight when she hadn’t had a good one in a while.

The doors opened. The hallway stretched out before her.

It was nineteen steps to the door. She counted.

Shepard never hesitated when it came to her mission, but she stood in front of Kaidan’s door with her fist raised for over a minute before she managed to knock.

No answer. A briefer moment of indecision, and she put her thumb to the lock. The hatch slid out of sight onto an empty room. She took a halting step inside.

A VI spoke. “Welcome home, Commander Shepard.”

This place wasn’t her home, whatever else it was. She looked around, an intruder.

“You declined our new occupant tour on your first arrival.” The VI’s voice was impossibly flat. Funny how talking to an actual VI made EDI sound almost human. “Would you like take it now?”

She cleared her throat. “Where’s Kaidan?”

“Commander Alenko expects to be away for an extended time. He did not leave a travel destination.”

It figured that he’d be deployed. He hated sitting around in port as much as she did. Shepard ventured further within, aimless. Forlorn, really. No idea what to do now. It never crossed her mind she might get up the nerve to see him, and he wouldn’t be home.
Shepard dropped onto the couch, stone-heavy and utterly defeated. There was a crushing sadness out of all proportion with such a small disappointment. Sure, she’d all but paralyzed herself these past weeks, heart aching with fear, but over what, exactly? That he’d be angry, reject her, refuse to see her outright, all shunting away her real concern.

Two years was long enough that he might not love her anymore. And it was painfully clear to Shepard, sitting in Kaidan’s living room, stripped of all excuses, that she still loved him. Fully, deeply, recklessly, like not an hour had passed since that morning over Alchera. She made Kaidan her home. Her safe harbor. Kaidan saw her, Nathaly, who hated being seen, and she’d never wanted him to stop looking. But reason said that closeness between them, that mutual simpatico, was possibly— probably— in the distant past. Death had that sort of finality.

All the other impacts of resurrection she could handle, the scars, the grief and guilt, the Cerberus problem. But not this. She couldn’t bear to raise the question if there was any possibility the answer was no. And in reaching out to Kaidan, there could be no avoiding it. So she avoided him instead.

Shepard took a shuddering breath. Smoothed her hands over her khakis and looked around, desperate for some distance. It had to kill him to see the place like this. Aboard the Normandy, he was meticulously tidy, from his clothes to his footlocker. Heavy items on the bottom, most delicate things on top, all of it folded square and tucked away in its proper place. If he wanted something like a book, he never gave into the temptation to reach his hand down the side and wiggle it out; no, always, always, with patience to try a saint, he removed the items laying over it and put it all back together, neat as a pin.

Damage from the robbery was everywhere. No amount of cleaning could hide disemboweled cushions, plants hastily repotted into cereal bowls with their dirt ground into the floor, nails on the wall where pictures hung. Several had been torn out in great gouges—the frames ripped down so violently that they took the hanger with them.

Shepard felt odd, surrounded by half-finished repairs. Like she really was the thief C-Sec accused her of being. She ought to leave. But instead she stood and took a few wandering steps. Needing to see him with a longing that was way beyond trepidation. But he wasn’t here, and no amount of waiting would bring him back before she had to leave again.

This robbery, almost surely another Cerberus cell, proved it was far too dangerous to contact him electronically. Not when she couldn’t say what traces Cerberus put on her equipment or accounts, not when Kaidan was a Cerberus target. But she could at least write a note.

A search for paper sent her deeper into the apartment. Despite every sense of propriety, in truth looking for something to catch her out of her sudden freefall.

Her fingers trailed over tabletops and along walls. How in the hell had he stayed here all these years? It confounded her. Wasn’t it beyond painful, living in the shards of the life they wanted to build together? Or hadn’t it been like that for him? Maybe he came back after his month of exile on Alchera and did what ostensibly healthy people do, and got over it. Or maybe what they had wasn’t as strong as she remembered, away from the adrenaline and urgency, or at least wasn’t to him. Her chest tightened.

She shunted the thought aside, and kept looking, distracting herself with pragmatics. Trying not to picture Kaidan coming into the apartment, stopping in his tracks as he saw her. Definitely not feeling the lump build in her throat, stopping her words even in her imagination, or him rushing forward and crushing her in his arms, so tight and fierce that it burned away any doubt that he might have missed her.
Manners kept her from searching the drawers, but it also made it impossible to find something to write with, as she wandered room to room. The bedroom last. That felt strangest of all, the most intimate room and therefore the greatest invasion, and she both didn’t want to stay long and never wanted to leave. The bed was covered in spare clothes and other dross, not his usual standard of clean. He must have left in a hurry. She circuited the perimeter once and then sat gingerly on the edge, staring out at the walls, the closet, the window looking out over the ward.

A datapad lay on the nightstand, shoving the lamp off to the edge. It was too easy to see him sitting up reading, groping blindly in the dark to set it down when he got too tired to continue. She wondered how many times he’d knocked the lamp off.

She moved the datapad aside and frowned. Kaidan kept another picture under it. The nightstand wasn’t really large enough for both the lamp and the datapad, let alone picture frame as well. It fritzed into life as she turned it over. Her hand went to her mouth.

Kaidan on the left, warm, careless as he so seldom was, eyes half-shut in the middle of a gentle laugh. Her leaning into him, red hair a beach wind bird’s nest, freckled and grinning and just plain happy, like she seldom was. Foreheads bent to each other like they were the only people in the world.

It was their last night on Abael, the four days out of the world they spent in a Traverse tourist trap after Sovereign’s defeat, once the hospital released her. Sometimes she believed the whole hard mess of their mission was worth those few perfect days.

In some ways, she was holding what she spent the last twenty minutes searching for without quite hoping to find. A bit of tangible proof that he still thought of her at all. That what they had still meant something to him.

But now that she had it, she realized this wasn’t what she wanted, either. The thought of Kaidan forgetting her was bad, but the thought of him hurting for two years because of what she did was worse.

Maybe it wasn’t quite that awful. Some Cerberus imposter had just broken into his home. That had to bring some of the memories back, made him think about them more than he usually did. The nightstand was very small; it didn’t seem possible this picture lived there.

Still no sign of any notetaking apparatus. She laid the photo aside and picked up the datapad. It was his personal, and not well-secured. Even a luddite like her could pick out the four numbers for the pin by examining the smears on the glass. Kaidan’s neatnik tendencies actually made it easier; since he cleaned the screen regularly, the imprints had nowhere to hide. Basic math made twenty-four combinations, and by sheer luck she stumbled over it on her last guess before lockout.

Shepard’s intention was to record a message, nothing more. But Kaidan left it open to something else. An idea web, hand drawn with a stylus, and in the middle of it was a bubble labeled Cerberus.

She turned the datapad, manipulating it to see where the connections led. A lot of it didn’t make sense to her—Triton, Project Osiris, Nephilim, Chasca, though that last led to Farrell/Archer, which did ring an awful bell. But it was next to impossible that Farrell was her Farrell. It wasn’t a tremendously uncommon name.

The ones she did recognize alarmed her. Collectors. Illusive Man.

Lazarus. Her blood turned to ice. If he knew she was with Cerberus—
Entirely the wrong question. She took a deep breath, reaching for calm. The right way to think of it was if Kaidan knew Cerberus HAD her, for two years, he wouldn’t let that stand. He knew exactly how she felt about being kept alive like that.

This apartment was fucking with her head. Making her forget was real and imagine things that weren’t. She had more than her share of that, lately.

Annoyed with herself, she swiped back to the home screen and found the recording function. Took a moment to find composure and then just spoke, whatever words came into her mind, until there was nothing more she needed to say.

Shepard set it to play the next time the datapad was accessed. Then she left the apartment, before she was tempted to do something truly stupid.

Getting out of the building and into relatively fresh air did wonders to clear out the cobwebs. She started walking in the direction of the Presidium. Regardless of where she stood with Kaidan today, she had several mysteries on her hands. Cerberus revived her, motives unclear. Kaidan got his hands on something valuable enough that they trashed his apartment and risked exposing their organization to get it back. Shepard could ask Miranda about that, but she doubted she’d know. This was clearly a different cell. And Collectors were abducting hundreds of thousands of colonists, also with no apparent motive.

She was in way over her head. The Alliance need to hear about this, but Shepard wasn’t about to surrender herself. Once they heard her story, they’d treat her like a lab rat, same as Cerberus. Poke and prod and cut, trying to figure her out.

A shudder ran through her. No, she couldn’t go back there. Not yet.

Bailey asked about old friends. Anderson remained the human councilor. If her spectre email wasn’t shut down, likely she could get to his offices without prompting a security alert. Would he see her? Would he believe her as readily as Bailey?

Anderson was an old friend of her family, and a close personal friend of hers as well, not just a superior officer but a mentor throughout her naval career. Surely he’d at least talk.

Shepard took an elevator to the Presidium and headed for Udina’s old office.

As she walked around the artificial lake that circled the Presidium ring, she was shocked by how little damage remained from Sovereign’s attack. That could be one reason the galaxy found the reaper threat so easy to ignore. All the discomfort was gone.

The conduit still stood, though she spotted two guards stationed on the bridge nearby. At least somebody still saw the presence of a back-door relay in the heart of galactic government as a threat.

She arrived at Anderson’s office. His asari secretary paused her call, and wrinkled her nose. “Yes?”

Shepard smoothed the front of her shirt. Aside from Bailey, who had DNA assistance, nobody had recognized her since she arrived. It was simultaneously a disappointment and a relief. “Nathaly Shepard, here to see Councilor Anderson.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No.” Shepard was nonplussed.
“I’m afraid the Councilor doesn’t accept visits from people off the stre—” The secretary’s autopilot disengaged. Shepard watched her replay the conversation, take note of her name, and grow a shade paler. “I’m sorry, did you say you were…?”

“Nathaly Shepard,” she repeated, patiently. “Here to see Councilor Anderson. He’ll want you to let me through.”

“Just one moment, please.” She got up and went into the office.

Shepard couldn’t overhear what was said. She fidgeted, abruptly nervous, and took a few steadying breaths.

The asari returned and gestured towards the door. “Please, go right in.”

The hatch slid shut behind her. Anderson waited by the balcony, looking out over the manicured gardens of the lower Presidium. Shepard had stood at his side through the attack on Eden Prime, the revelation of the reapers, Udina’s treachery, and the aftermath of the Battle of the Citadel. In each case, he responded decisively, with that mix of conviction and certainty that made him such an exemplary officer. Anderson was as unshakeable as bedrock.

Or so she thought. As he turned towards her, his expression was ashen. He took a half-step forward. “Nathaly?”

There was hope hidden in his eyes, but it was almost completely overshadowed by fear. Tali said it took a month to recover the Normandy survivors. For the first time, she considered what kind of hell that must have been, for Anderson especially. He sent her out there. They parted on bad terms — Anderson furious about her fraternization with Kaidan and cavalier treatment of a serious head injury, Shepard offended by his intrusion into her personal affairs. And then she vanished without any warning, lost in the Terminus, where the Alliance would be reluctant to mount a rescue.

Seeing that old pain and unprecedented anxiety on her mentor’s face was more unsettling than the last month put together. She went to attention and struggled to find her voice. “Hello, sir.”

He took her in. His own voice shook, just the barest touch. “You look like you’ve been through the wars.”

“I might say the same about you.” He’d aged a decade in the last two years, hair grayed and lines etched deep into his leathery face.

“Where have you been?”

“Unconscious, aboard a Cerberus research station.” She swallowed. “I kind of wish the rescue team took the couple of extra hours and hauled us out of there, before they got to me.”

He paled. “You were alive?”

She glanced away. “Not exactly.”

He didn’t speak for a long moment. Shepard couldn’t look at him. This was too strange, too much. She shouldn’t have come. Thank god Kaidan wasn’t home. Then, directly on the heels of that thought, a longing that cut her to the bone.

Finally, Anderson said, “Can an old man buy you lunch?”

She blinked. He sounded more like the Anderson she remembered. When she risked a glance, she
saw there was a small smile at the corner of his mouth. The mood hanging over the office lightened. “Is that Italian place still standing?”

One cab ride later, and they were sitting tucked in the back of a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, one of his favorites two years ago. From the state of the checkered vinyl tablecloths, Shepard guessed they hadn’t been cleaned in about that long.

Anderson ordered for them both. That, too, was familiar. Shepard was able to relax. “How’d you know it was really me?”

He chuckled. “I’ve known you since you were in pigtails. There’s no trick of technology that’s going to fool me. Besides, I was half-expecting…”

He trailed off. It took her a moment to get it, and then she was surprised they’d kept in touch. “You heard about Cerberus tossing Kaidan’s apartment.”

“We ran into each other a few days ago.” Their drinks arrived. Anderson sipped at his coffee. “And there’s been reports, more credible than usual.”

“Reports?” She was lost.

“Shepard sightings.” A hint of a smile, as if he knew how ridiculous that had to sound. “On Omega, in this case.”

“I’ve been to Omega a few times lately.” She paused. “I didn’t break into Kaidan’s apartment. Cerberus had everything they needed to impersonate me to the building’s automated security.”

“I was afraid of that. But I hoped… I guess coincidence is still in full force.”

“You can say that twice.” She slouched down and draped her arm over the back of her chair. “They patched this place right up. I haven’t seen so much as a scarred bulkhead.”

“After the battle? Mostly. Some of the wards are still in bad shape. Tayseri’s the worst, power outages, housing shortages, you name it.” Anderson folded his hands on the table and shook his head. “The keepers did most of the work. We’d put in some ugly repair, and by next morning, they’d make it seamless. Don’t know where they get the supplies. Not sure I want to.” He peered at her. “What happened to you? How did Cerberus get involved?”

“Best I can tell, they snatched my corpse, and spent years rebuilding me.” She didn’t disguise her discomfort, but somehow it got easier every time she had to tell it. Nice, for once, to be candid. “I woke up last month, with a lot of strings attached. I haven’t figured out how to cut all of them yet.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked down at the table. “I led the rescue expedition personally. Somehow, the navy lost track of your ship out there, and it took four weeks for the survivors to figure out how to broadcast a signal through the relay with their damaged equipment. When Alenko told me you didn’t make it… I just wanted to pack up and leave, as quickly as possible. It would’ve taken weeks to sift through the wreckage for remains.”

“Kaidan told you.” It was hard to think of Anderson receiving news of her death; Kaidan, impossible. Her heart contracted into a leaden ball. Nobody should live to witness how much pain their death inflicted.

Anderson cleared his throat. “It’s a hell of a story, how they made it out alive.”
“I’ll have to get Joker to tell me sometime.” She paused as the waiter delivered their food—spaghetti for him, ravioli for her, just like old times.

“Joker?” Anderson said. “He went UA, five months ago. Even I heard about that one.”

“He’s piloting my ship,” she replied without preamble. “Cerberus stole the Normandy schematics and built their own version. That, or recruited some of the key engineers. Either way the navy’s got a leak.”

“They revived you, and put you in a copy ship.” Anderson was disturbed. She was gratified to see it. “Why?”

“Hell if I know.” She noticed he avoided the subject of how Cerberus overcame death, but didn’t push it. She didn’t want to discuss it, either. Once the food hit her stomach, she discovered she was famished. “All they’d tell me is they want to stop these colony abductions.”

“They’re worried about that? Hmm.” His brow furrowed. He set down his fork to think. “Do they have some ideas on who might be behind the attacks?”

“We found some evidence on Freedom’s Progress pointing to the Collectors.” She spoke around the pile of food in her mouth. “Video logs. Weird dark energy signatures.”

“The Collectors? You’re sure this isn’t Cerberus leading you on?”

Shepard shook her head, swallowed. “It would’ve been damn hard to set up. I got the data from a quarian gone almost insensible with terror in the wake of the attack. And we got corroboration on Omega, from a plague of all things.”

Anderson snorted. Her brow furrowed. “What?”

“Nothing. I just can’t help—” He shook his head. “In just these few weeks you’ve managed to make more progress on ending these abductions than the navy has in a year. You are something else.”

“The Illusive Man was holding out. He already suspected the Collectors. You might want to run some analysis against the old intel, see if you can find whatever he did.”

He frowned again, and resumed eating. She added, “The Collectors could be working for the reapers.”

“The reapers.” He made a noise of disgust. “I’ve spent two years just trying to convince the other councilors they’re real. They don’t want to believe it.”

“What?” She was intimately familiar with their reluctance to act, but until now assumed that their motives were political. “What about Ilos? What about Sovereign?”

“The VI on Ilos shut itself down. No more power. You and your crew were the only ones to speak to it, or Sovereign. Dr. T’Soni’s account is compromised because of her mother, and Alenko… He’s a good marine. Once the nature of your relationship came out—and it would have—the Council would dismiss his testimony as biased and the navy would be out a fine officer. We’re short enough on those as it is.”

“Tali spoke to Sovereign—”

“Tali’Zorah is a quarian.” Anderson held up his hand to forestall her protest. “I know it’s not
right. You know I do. But I’m powerless to change how the Council feels about that, either.”

Shepard persisted. “But surely somebody took a look at what was left of Sovereign’s wreckage.”

“Between the keepers and the chaos after the battle, and a whole lot of unauthorized salvage, nobody can account for even half that thing.” Anderson sounded as frustrated as she felt. “What remains has been classified as geth technology. Officially the reapers are a myth invented by Saren. You and I know the truth, for all the good it’s done us.”

There wasn’t much to say about that. They ate in silence. After few minutes, she said, “Sir?”

“What is it?”

She looked up. “Do you know where Kaidan is now?”

“Shepard.” He sighed. “Nathaly. I know this isn’t what you want to hear.”

“It’s a simple question,” she protested.

“Staff Commander Alenko has a new assignment. Not one I can reveal in good conscience to someone in close contact with Cerberus.”

“Anderson, please—”

“It’s been two years. He’s moved on with his life.” He spoke gently enough, but with an equal measure of finality. “You might want to consider doing the same.”

Shepard thought about that picture on his nightstand. She fidgeted with her napkin, folding the paper into a crease and straightening it again, staring at that stupid checked tablecloth. She only looked up when he said her name.

Anderson looked at her with frank concern. “This isn’t like you.”

“What’s not like me?”

“You’re always full of stubborn fire and dead certainty. Even when you’ve got no cause for either.” He sounded equal parts annoyed and worried. “Last time I suggested anything like that you took my head off.”

Shepard dropped her eyes again, tracing a bit of spilled water with her fingertip, dragging it along the tablecloth’s pattern. He was right, and she hated it. The constant unsteadiness, the relentless self-questioning. She was in freefall.

She regretted asking about Kaidan in the first place. Especially that little “please”. Two years ago, she’d have demanded the answer. Not begged.

He leaned towards her. “Nathaly—”

She muttered something. Anderson frowned. “I can’t hear you.”

“I said who I am kidding?” Her head jerked up, anger overwriting the thick stew of everything else she’d been feeling for far too long. “I can’t help these colonies. I can’t even sleep in my own bed.”

His face scrunched in confusion. “What are you talking about?”
“Cerberus built the skipper’s cabin into the roof of the SR-2. Some engineer had the bright idea to install giant skylights over the bed. For the view.”

It took him a few seconds, but then he let out a tired breath, deflating. “And the entire roof of the CIC of the SR-1 was laid open in the attack.”

“First barrage,” she confirmed, bitterly. “Nobody had any time to grab an O2 mask. Not that it would have mattered, because the decompression shot most of them clear out of the ship.”

Without any effort at all, she could still see Bakari’s corpse trapped under a pile of debris, his dark hair an anemone about his head in the loss of gravity. She shook her head to clear it as much as register her disgust with the whole situation. “And you know where I was?”

“I’m sure wherever—”

“I was in the shower. I was late relieving Pressly on the bridge, and rushing to get ready. That was how casual we’d gotten about surveying the goddamn Terminus. Even the C.O. didn’t bother to show up for watch on time.”

“You’ve never shown up for a watch on time in your life.” Anderson attempted reason. “You couldn’t possibly have expected a geth ship to see through the IES.”

“It wasn’t a geth—” She cut herself off, because it didn’t matter. “Pressly died in the first wave. I was supposed to be on that bridge, not him.”

“And Pressly would’ve been blown out of the CIC, and nobody would be left to evacuate the ship.”

“Kaidan evac’d the ship.”

“You gave the order.”

She stared across the table at him, her eyes wild and not a little haunted, not sure what she wanted to ask or hear or say at all. “I shouldn’t be here, Anderson.”

“No,” he said, surprising her. “But you are. Who’s our enemy?”

She blinked. It was the same thing he’d asked her, over and over, while she chased Saren. “It’s the reapers, sir.”

“Is our enemy dead, Marine?”

Shepard straightened in her chair from sheer force of habit, an ingrained response to that tone. “No, sir. Our enemy is not dead.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re both still alive, yes?”

She felt herself beginning to smile, just a bit, despite everything. “Yes, sir.”

“And do we allow some temporary hardship to prevent us from hunting our enemy wherever it hides?”

“Sir, we do not.” Struggling now, not to show her amusement.

“We do not. We finish our mission. We’re going to go on being alive,” he continued, perfectly serious, “And we’re going to go on fighting, and winning, until we are the last stubborn motherfuckers left in this galaxy.”
She couldn’t hold back her chuckle any longer. Shepard offered a deliberately half-assed, two-finger salute. “Sir, yes sir.”

That seemed to be exactly what he was going for, because he settled back in his chair and smiled. A rare sort of smile for him, broad and genuine and self-satisfied. “Good. Get back to it.”

It was a thoroughly navy chastisement, the kind that left her ears burning, but also more steady than she’d been since she woke up. Perspective helped. She might not have a C.O. right now, but it seemed Anderson was still more than happy to oblige.

Shepard laid her utensils on the plate and stood. “I should go. My X.O. doesn’t like me out of her sight long.”

“They handling you?” he asked, casually, with another sip of coffee.

Her mouth turned up at one corner. “They’re trying.”

His turn to laugh. “There is one other thing. Technically, you were never removed from the spectre ranks. I can offer you the title back, and reinstate your full privileges without approval from the other councilors. Just say the word.”

The Council, old and new, had always been maliciously useless. They kept her from critical intelligence, questioned her skill and motives at every opportunity, and their ineptitude at handling their own military forces arguably allowed the Battle of the Citadel to happen. Now they were doing it again, burying their heads in the sand and waiting for a crisis. Squandering the time she bought them with the blood of her crew.

All mirth died. She lifted her eyes to his, a deep, cold anger in their depths, though none of it was for him. Her lip curled. “Keep it.”

He nodded. “I would’ve done the same. Take care, Shepard.” His tone turned more serious, more like when she first arrived at his office. “I mean that. Don’t make me give your parents that kind of news twice in one lifetime.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Shepard took the long way back to the docks, walking most of it and letting herself enjoy the station. She hadn’t thought much of the Citadel before. Its sheer size was awe-inspiring, but for being the center of everything, it was sure as hell located in the middle of nowhere. The bureaucracy frustrated her. The hypocrisy infuriated her. But after Omega, wandering the Citadel was a shirt fresh out of the laundry. Clean, soft, nice.

And if the Citadel felt like a reprieve, coming aboard her ship felt… natural, at least. Almost like this was where she belonged, maybe not forever, but for now.

Jacob was in the CIC going over their logistics. “There you are. I doubt we want to linger in port, but there are a few things we should pick up while we’re in Council space.”

She drew up beside him to look at her terminal screen. “Such as?”

“For starters, fuel is less expensive. So are provisions.”

“Gardner’s stocking up?”

Jacob nodded. “But without offense to our mess sergeant, I’d like to ensure we have essential
stores as well as experimental ingredients."

Shepard gave him a wry smile. Gardner’s love of tinkering with his recipes was infamous among the crew. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Sorting out their logistics took a few hours. After that, her engineers wanted her approval to perform some kind of shake out of the drive core. Her crew slowly trickled back to the ship after a day in port, looking better for it. It appeared R&R was as coveted within Cerberus as the navy.

It was 2200 before she knew it. Getting up as early as she did meant early to bed as well, when she could swing it, which was less often than she liked. Shepard was good at going without sleep, but that didn’t make it fun. She escaped to her cabin before another to-do list could find her.

Kelly Chambers just about jumped out of her skin as the hatch slid open. Shepard raised one eloquent eyebrow.

Her yeoman hastened to step back from the fish tank and offered a harried and still painfully incorrect salute. “Shepard. Ma’am. I can explain.”

“These are my private quarters, Ms. Chambers.” She was less bothered than taken aback. Kelly was the last person she’d expect to snoop through her cabin.

“I found it at a pet shop near Zakera Point,” she said, naming the apex of the ward arm, furthest from the Presidium ring. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“Surprise me?” Shepard approached the fish tank. Her four acquisitions from Omega had settled in nicely. Watching them swim back and forth was meditative, and she got more simple pleasure out of feeding them than she would readily admit. It was good to have a few members of her crew who were easy to please, even if they were just fish.

But now, a fifth had joined them. It was an ugly thing, blackish-gray with thick whiskers and an eel-like body the length of her forearm. It stared back with sullen eyes. “You got me a fish?”

“It’s a type of catfish.” Kelly fidgeted. “From Earth. Indonesia, I think.”

She’d seldom seen such an unattractive creature. Something in its flat face suggested it was strongly considering reclassifying her as a meal. “That’s… nice.”

“He seemed unusual. I thought you’d be drawn to something out of the ordinary.”

“It’s a him?” Shepard was at a total loss to explain sex differentiation among fish.

Kelly crossed her arms defensively. “It looks like a him.”

It wasn’t like she could return it. “Thanks, Kelly. That was… very generous of you.”

She broke into a jittery smile, as though she’d dreaded some worse response, and pointed tentatively at the hatch. “I’ll just…”

“You do that.” Shepard watched her scamper out, then shook her head and looked back at the tank. The newest fish had curled up around the base of one of the plastic plants, where it continued to glare. “You and me both, pal.”

She gave them their food, noting he was not too snobby to turn down a chance at compressed krill flakes, and got ready for bed. Then she picked up the armor pieces off the floor, and racked it
properly for the first time since coming aboard. It was a mess, but this little effort was better than nothing.

As she slotted it into its niche, a console lit up. Apparently the armor was embedded with photonic crystals. Presumably for camouflage, but there was nothing stopping her from using whatever colors she liked.

Years ago, an N4 instructor, trying to teach them something about recon and despairing of their disdain for memory exercises, barked out, “What we are is what we remember.” Trying, in his frustration, to drive home that these things were entirely about assembling and acting on intelligence, and if they ignored the tedious in favor of the exciting, they’d all end up in the shit. But the phrase itself stuck with her.

There was a lot she’d chosen to forget. Deliberately or in the name of survival, it didn’t matter. But some things she wanted to keep. Some things were worth keeping.

Shepard looked at her armor, set to black with spec ops’ customary broad red and white stripe down the right arm, the discrete N7 commendation fastened on the breast. She’d worn some variant for most of her career. Then she found the proper toggle, and set that stripe to bold Alliance blue. Studied it for a moment with something like satisfaction and closed up the cabinet.

There was one more thing. Cerberus left a few picture frames in her cabin, mercifully empty. As twisted around as she was when she first laid eyes on the place, she’d have ground their plastic into dust if they’d presumed to fill them for her.

Shepard picked up the one on the coffee table and loaded in the Abael picture. Why not? It was the one she would’ve chosen anyway, even if she never set foot in that apartment.

She set it on the nightstand, then slid under the covers, settled into the pillow, closed her eyes, and for the first time in one month, two years, and twelve days, managed to fall asleep in her own bed. It wasn’t better and might never be, but it was getting easier, and tonight that was enough.
Three Cerberus Experiments

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Brief mention of a rape threat. Brief references to past torture.

August 2185

Shepard stood on the bridge of the Normandy with her arms crossed. “This doesn’t feel right.”

The prison ship Purgatory grew larger in the port with every passing minute as Joker maneuvered towards the docking tube. It utterly dwarfed the Normandy.

Joker made a face. “It’s a Blue Suns slaver ship and we’re coming as buyers. Of course it feels skeezy.”

“Prison ship.”

“They sell people, Commander.”

“Yeah.” She glanced at him. “Want to shoot them down on our way out?”

“Do you want an honest answer?”

EDI interrupted. “Ninety seconds to hard dock.”

Shepard gave the approaching ship a final look. “I have to finish suiting up.”

Joker took in her hardsuit. “Going full kit for a pickup?”

“Like you said, these people are trash. I choose to expect the worst.” In theory, this was a straightforward transaction. In practice, rumors linking to batarian slaving operations and other unsavory enterprises suggested a degree of opportunism best confronted while well-armed. She considered for a moment. “You know what, Joker, keep the engines running.”

He made a little noise, cynical agreement. “Yes, ma’am.”

Shepard made her way to the armory, where Miranda was already strapping on her gear. Miranda had a miniaturized and wildly expensive personal shield generator hidden in same belt that supported her weapons, but eschewed a proper hardsuit. Having seen her fight, Shepard couldn’t blame her much. It would be hard to move as quickly or fluidly in a full kit. For her own part, though, Shepard preferred armor plating.

Miranda looked up as Shepard came in. “This should be quick. Cerberus paid Jack’s release fee in advance.”

“What do we know about Jack?” The Cerberus-supplied dossier had been light on the details.

Apparently, Miranda noticed, too. She shook her head. “Jack is an exceptionally strong biotic with violent tendencies. Enough so to end up here, away from any settlements. I also know the Illusive Man has been interested in her for a long time. Years.”
Shepard took her rifle from the rack and checked it carefully. “I hope your boss realizes I have no intention of transferring Jack from one form of captivity to another.”

“He wants her for Lazarus cell. I wouldn’t worry about it.” Miranda slid her submachine gun into its holster. “But you should keep in mind Jack is a criminal. One who’s killed dozens of people, and not for any good reason. Your sympathy may be misplaced.”

Shepard had met damn few people who deserved Cerberus, of any level of criminality, and wasn’t a huge believer in eye-for-an-eye anyway. The natural universe itself wasn’t that fair, so why should people expect that of their society? But she was making an extra effort to not argue Cerberus politics with Miranda. For one thing, Miranda might just be smarter than she was herself, and a better debater. For another, they were never going to change each other’s minds.

So aloud, she simply said, “This is all moot until we get Jack aboard. Let’s go.”

They grabbed the last of their gear, and proceeded to the airlock.

Originally designed for transporting livestock, Purgatory was bought at a scrapyard for next to nothing, and completely refitted for a new life housing some of the most notorious, dangerous, or simply unlucky criminals in the galaxy. Compared to the Normandy, it lumbered along with neither elegance nor efficiency. Five long arms stuck out of each side of its broad spine. Reports claimed over 4300 people were sequestered aboard, though Miranda had heard figures much higher. Shepard couldn’t imagine how they all fit.

As they waited for the airlock to cycle, Shepard commented, “No markings on the ship. Odd, for a Suns enterprise.”

“They don’t want to advertise.” Miranda folded her arms. “Various settlements pay them a hefty fee to corral their worst offenders. It can cost even more to keep them here. Purgatory’s management isn’t above extortion.”

“Extortion?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Threats to let select prisoners loose on their home worlds.” Miranda cleared her throat, delicately. “At a time and place of the Suns’ choosing.”

“I see.” Shepard frowned. “And they just sell prisoners to whoever asks.”

“Whoever can pay.” The airlock opened with a hiss of air and a metallic clank that sounded throughout the ship. Miranda grimaced. “Let’s get this over with.”

They emerged onto a broad concourse. A pair of armed guards, batarian, stood near a hatch with weapons readied. A third hurried forward to greet them, this one turian. Even the Suns weren’t entirely above the prejudices of the galaxy. “Welcome to the Purgatory. We’re prepping your package now.”

“Excellent,” said Miranda, watching the man with narrowed eyes. He had a slightly nervous air.

He nodded, but he was staring at Shepard. “However, I have to insist you relinquish your weapons before we can proceed. Standard procedure for a high-security vessel. I’m sure you understand.”

Shepard put her hand on her pistol and raised an eyebrow. “I’ll relinquish one bullet. Where do you want it?”

The guard took a half step back before he checked himself. Miranda offered an edged smile.
“Surely our friend isn’t suggesting his prisoners are so ill-managed that they might overwhelm guests of the ship at the mere sight of a gun.”

He glanced between them, clearly unhappy, but was spared a reply as a second turian emerged from the hatch. His armor showed less hard use than his associates, and a small insignia near his shoulder confirmed his rank. “Everyone stand down. Commander, welcome. I’m Warden Kuril, captain of the *Purgatory* and maintainer of this prison.”

Kuril gave Shepard a firm nod, which she returned, curtly. The man’s face was entirely bare, an oddity among turians. Their painted markings indicated their colonial origins. Forgoing them equated to forsaking any claim of home or loyalty, a fundamental untrustworthiness. In the Hierarchy, even murderers and deserters weren’t deprived of their marks.

The lower-ranked guard explained the situation in a few terse statements. Kuril’s mandibles twitched. “Your weapons will be returned when you leave. I’m afraid we can’t make an exception, for everyone’s safety.”

Miranda might be the credit card, but Shepard was still in command. She stood relaxed, though her hand didn’t stray from her pistol’s grip. “I’m not surrendering my guns. Do you want our business or not?”

His eyes narrowed. Shepard stared back, unfazed.

Then Kuril eased off and stepped aside. “You can proceed. Our security can outmatch two armed guests. If you’ll follow me to Out-Processing, Commander.”

That sounded almost more like a threat than posturing, but they were committed now. Shepard started forward. “Let’s go.”

The route took them past a bank of solitary cell capsules, not quite long enough for an adult human to lie down straight, moved via heavy robotic arms without much regard for keeping the cell’s floor oriented downward. Shepard might be a luddite, but she didn’t see anything resembling a mass effect field generator on the exterior of the cells, to hold gravity in one direction. Clearly the Suns gave little thought to the comfort of their living contents.

As they walked, Kuril described the operation with evident pride. The modular cells were cutting-edge equipment in the field of incarceration. He spoke casually of blowing several units out the airlock as an example to the remaining prisoners.

Revulsion touched her face. Miranda gave her an odd look— it wasn’t like her to repress her opinions. But this whole ship felt like a field of landmines, and she didn’t know the terrain well enough yet to avoid them.

The warden didn’t notice. “For special cases like Jack, we also have a state-of-the-art cryogenic suspension facility. We’re thawing her now. Once we get her into the proper restraining gear, of course.”

Shepard’s mouth moved without her, caution be damned. “I didn’t realize running a racket required so much high tech.”

“Hate my methods if you like, but don’t question my motives.” Kuril stopped walking. Real rancor colored his voice. “I started in law enforcement on Palaven. I saw firsthand the kind of scum who escape justice because of governments that can’t make the hard choices. This ship, keeping despicable people locked away, in deep space with nowhere to run— it’s a service to the
galaxy.”

Well, maybe that explained his bare face. Kuril had nothing but derision for the home he left behind.

“And the side business?” she asked, dryly.

“What do I care what someone wants with a waste of oxygen? It covers my overhead and allows me to continue our good work.”

Through another window, one prisoner shoved another, the beginning of a fight. A nearby guard tapped into his omni-tool and immediately both men were surrounded by mass effect bubbles, effectively separated.

Shepard turned her eyes back to Kuril. “We should keep moving.”

If he’d been a more observant or less calculating man, he would have noticed the cold menace in their depths, a small survival instinct screaming that Shepard was not something he wanted at his back just now, but instead he nodded blithely. A message flickered on his omni-tool. He grimaced. “It seems they’re having difficulty convincing our bank to issue confirmation of your credit transfer.”

“Is there a problem?” Miranda asked.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” Kuril gestured ahead. “I need to stop at our office. Just continue ahead to Out-Processing, past the interrogation rooms and the supermax wing. I’ll meet you there shortly.”

They watched him hurry off. Low, pitched for Miranda’s ears only, Shepard said, “First he tries to disarm us, and then he leaves us on our own without a second thought. I have a bad feeling about this pickup.”

“Agreed.” Miranda couldn’t see the trap either, not yet, but like Shepard she could sense it closing around them. “Onward with eyes open.”

They continued along the hallway, nonchalant, as though the exchange hadn’t happened. Shepard took note of the cameras fixed near the ceiling, perfect sentinels stationed every five meters, as well as the groans and screams that came from several of the nearest cells, the occasional meaty thumps of fists meeting flesh. Interrogation, indeed.

She could tell Miranda heard it, too. Her face was placid, but her eyes had gone flat and hard. In four short weeks, Shepard had learned a healthy respect for that particular expression. Prisoners called to them from a few of the cells docked with the corridor, pleas for intercession, for purchase or death. It was a long walk.

One of them, particularly persistent, banged the glass with his fist. “Please! You can’t leave me here.”

Shepard paused. Hope lit his face. “You buying prisoners? Man, I don’t care what you do to me. Just take me with me you.”

Shepard found she had difficulty controlling her tone. “Guess this place really is as much a market as a prison.”

“The warden sells us to whoever can pay. Sometimes people buy cons to do a little punishing of their own. Sometimes other things.” His eyes darted around. “ Anything’s better than this.”
“We’re here for Jack,” Shepard said.

“Jack?” He stumbled back with real fear. “Never mind. I don’t want any piece of that kind of trouble. Or crazy.”

“We don’t have time for this.” Miranda continued onward.

Shepard’s gaze lingered on the prisoner a moment longer before following. “Just how dangerous is this person you want to bring aboard my ship? That guy was more afraid of her than the guards.”

“Cerberus isn’t stepping into her wardens’ shoes. We’re not going to beat her senseless, for starters. With luck, she may have a more tractable reaction.”

For a long moment, the only sound was their footsteps falling steadily on the metal floor. Then Shepard asked, “You think she’ll be grateful?”

Miranda paused between steps, just for the briefest moment. “I would have last month.”

Shepard actually chuckled. She couldn’t help it. “You want me to do the talking?”

“Probably for the best.” Miranda shook her head. “This place makes my skin crawl. Let’s complete our transaction and leave.”

It was a mercy when they reached Out-Processing at long last. The room contained a few long desks and a hatch at the back corner, the same size as the cells they passed in the hall. Shepard guessed Jack would be docked there via one of the robotic arms organizing each block. They proceeded aft and paused by the hatch to wait.

One minute became two, and two became ten. She expected some sort of staff presence, to process the paperwork if nothing else, but no one came. Miranda caught her eye and pointed to one of the terminals. A file sat open at random, as though abandoned in haste, with no time to properly finish the current task or close out the user’s session. She pointed again, indicating the several chairs pushed back from the desks at odd angles, rather than tucked in neatly.

Shepard raised her hand to her ear. “I’m calling the Normandy.”

Three things happened in rapid succession. A burst of ear-splitting static and an alert from her omni-tool signaled her comm was being jammed. The hatch at the front of the room slammed shut. And the hatch at their backs opened, as Warden Kuril’s voice came over the loudspeaker. “My apologies, Commander Shepard. You’re more valuable as a prisoner than a customer.”

They stared at the interior of an empty modular cell. Kuril continued. “Drop your weapons and walk inside. You will not be harmed.”

Shepard’s hands balled into fists. “I am so tired of reminding people I am not a goddamn piece of property.”

“Don’t make this hard on yourself.”

“I don’t take orders from slaver trash.” Shepard drew her rifle and shot out the speaker. Miranda likewise pulled her gun from its holster. It unfolded smoothly in her grip. As she checked it over, conversationally, she said, “We’ll have company soon.”

“Yeah.” Shepard went to the nearest desk and overturned it, spilling several terminals to the floor
and creating a makeshift barricade. “They’ll have to unlock the door first. Can you jam it manually?”

“Let’s see.” With their comms blocked, it would take too long to determine which frequencies were available to sync an omni-tool to the electronic lock. She walked to the hatch and examined the track.

Shepard continued to rearrange the furniture to create more obstacles, with a practiced efficiency and total lack of haste that revealed the spectre lurking behind the very messy, very human woman exposed by recent events. This was where she lived, more comforting than any home, and more familiar than her own name. Having the fight out in the open at last was better than waiting for Kuril to leap. Maybe he planned this, maybe he improvised when he saw who came to the pick-up, but either way he was a dead man walking.

Miranda snapped off a desk leg by bracing it against the floor and kicking it loose with her heel, and slid it into place. “It’ll stick half-open. It’s something.”

Footsteps hurried through the corridor, with a few unintelligible shouts. Shepard rolled her shoulder, crouched behind the desk, and aimed her rifle at the hatch. “Here they come.”

Miranda sank down beside her, and gathered energy into her hand for a biotic strike.

The first of the guards forced his way into the room, turning sideways and scraping his armor up against the jammed door. They fired simultaneously. He went limp and stuck there, to the curses of his colleagues. The door’s motor made an awful squeal.

“I don’t suppose we could go out through the cell,” Shepard said, as they waited for the mercs to sort it out.

Miranda shook her head. “Even if we could disconnect the cell, it only leads into a prison block.”

With a grunt, another of the guards, a batarian, gave the corpse a mighty kick and sent it sprawling into the room. He had more intelligence and opted to fire at them from the cover of the hatch. A third took advantage of their distraction to squeeze through the opening.

Miranda flung her primed hand up over the desk, releasing an energy field that latched onto the guard and cast him up towards the ceiling. Shepard shot him before he slammed into the ground. Miranda tried to tag the batarian laying cover fire, with no luck. “The first one that gets through will pull out the table leg.”

“This is so slow, it’s boring me, anyway.”

“EDI won’t like us out of contact.” A fourth guard, smart enough to have jury-rigged an auxiliary forward shield, attempted the gauntlet. Miranda held down her trigger.

Shepard hammered him with her rifle, raising her voice over the din. “If Kuril weren’t such a buffoon, he’d send men to seize the ship.”

“I’d like to see him try.”

The guard managed to set both feet inside the room. As predicted, he immediately turned around and seized her improvised doortstop. Unfortunately for him, this also moved his heavy shield aside and gave them a clear shot. He fell—but not before his hand closed around the table leg.

The hatch slid fully open and Blue Suns poured into Out-Processing.
Miranda slid sideways into the lee of a second desk to create a crossfire. Shepard had her hands full laying down a thick blanket of bullets, staying their advance and adding another several bodies to the pile obstructing their enemy’s path. Miranda used her smaller weapon to pick off individual targets through the hail, making every shot count while firing as fast as she dared. The hatch remained a bottleneck, but much less of one. As soon as Shepard’s thermal clip failed, the guards would charge, and they’d be overrun.

Then they got lucky.

The guards used FENRIS mechs to augment their forces. Hahne-Kedar was a human corporation, who understood the human psyche, and knew attack dogs triggered a primal fear response that even the best training found difficult to overcome. But the accommodations to adapt their two-legged mechs to four left the robotic dogs with weak armor and a vulnerable sensor array.

In the tight confines, Miranda couldn’t miss. Her shots pierced the glass faceplate and travelled deep into the chassis of the first mech, where at least one struck the power supply. It was half a body length out of the pack of guards when it exploded.

The guards nearest simply died. Further out, they were knocked off balance and fell to the floor, groaning from their wounds. Only two, tucked in the corner, survived unscathed. Even the three additional FENRIS mechs took enough damage to go into a protective shut-down.

Though there was no time to communicate the plan, Shepard didn’t miss a beat. She took out the remaining mechs in rapid succession, killing several of the wounded guards and forcing the pair of survivors into a defensive huddle.

Miranda took advantage of their demolished shields to hurl a ball of dark energy straight into the nearest. Shepard turned her fire on the guards while they stumbled in panic and confusion at the biotic attack. After that, it was just clean-up.

As the last one fell, Miranda stood up and pushed her hair back behind her ear. “What now?”

Shepard checked her gun, exchanged her thermal clip. “We go get our package.”

“What, really?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want it anymore?”

“Of course I do. But you didn’t want to be here in the first place.”

“Yeah, well, Kuril’s got me ticked off now.” She offered her a half-smile, and was rewarded by a completely disconcerted Miranda.

She recovered with her usual aplomb. “In that case, we need a facility map.”

“We should have the time. They locked down the prison. It’ll take a few minutes for the Suns to get additional units to this area.”

One of the terminals retained enough function to query. Shepard pointed. “Can you figure this out?”

“I can try.” She pulled up the haptic keyboard and began to type.

As she worked, Shepard took up watch by the hatch. Almost idly, she asked, “So. How much did you pay for me?”
“Aside from building and staffing a state-of-the-art laboratory dedicated to your care?”

“The Shadow Broker was selling me to the Collectors, right? I assume you beat their offer?” She was careful to keep it conversational. “I’m curious as to how badly Kuril might want this.”

Miranda shook her head. “The Broker wasn’t interested in other offers. It was a hostile acquisition. We did lose one of our agents, and personally, the Broker’s hired muscle beat the tar out of me while I attempted to located you. To discourage further inquiries.”

There was a long pause. Shepard cleared her throat. “I didn’t know.”

“I got the intel I needed. It was worth regrowing a few teeth to let them brag.” The casual words were at complete odds with her careful tone.

Shepard let out a little sound of rueful acknowledgement. She’d been in similar situations, and found them worth the price, not that it made them easy. “Rough experience, all the same.”

Miranda finally found the map. “If we can get to the ramp at the end of this corridor, we should have a straight shot through Block 14 to the cryo room.”

“Good. I hear activity, so they’ve got the doors open for us now.” Shepard turned from the hatch. “Let’s roll.”

Guards had started to trickle back into the hall. They fought their way up the corridor, moving with more coordination that Shepard would expect, given their short history. But it felt easy even on Omega, fighting through the plague-ridden neighborhood. They were both at the top of their abilities and it came naturally.

Soon, they arrived at the ramp. The hatch dividing them was hard locked. Shepard pried at it experimentally, with no luck. “Shit.”

Miranda forced the console open. “Watch my back. This could take some time.”

“No rush. We’ve only got half of Purgatory gunning for us.”

Her X.O. favored her with a long-suffering glare, and resumed her tedious work.

Shepard stood out of her way, keeping watch, fidgeting and trying to conceal her impatience. Her near-uselessness in the face of a technological challenge was nearly as infamous as her battle prowess. Several people had offered to teach her over the years, but she never found the time. Besides, it wasn’t like lessons would make computers any friendlier.

Then Miranda asked, without looking up, “How did you get your… experience?”

That earned her a very jaded glance. “I thought you knew everything about me.”

“If you think I committed every detail of your exhaustive dossier to memory, you should reconsider how I spend my time.” Matching her drop for drop of sarcasm.

“That’s comforting.” Shepard shrugged. “You know I was deployed to Aonia, in the Verge.”

“Aonia was a hotspot during the batarian conflict.”

“I was a corporal then. Twenty years old.” Something almost like nostalgia crossed her face, gone just as quickly. It wasn’t like this was a favorite memory. But shit, she missed being on the ground sometimes, in a platoon, just another marine.
“What of it?”

“Towards the end of the conflict, a bunch of ticked-off batarian officers ambushed my squad and held me for six days. Black ops came and got me out. That was actually the first time I met Anderson in a professional context.”

Miranda held up her omni-tool, which let her visualize the current flowing through the lock’s circuitry. “Your bio said he was a friend of the family. I imagine finding you like that came as a shock.”

“Seeing the little girl he remembered toddling around, all grown up with half her fingers broken? Yeah, just a little.” She snorted. “He rolls his eyes at it now. I got such a shot of adrenaline when they burst through the door that they had to haul me away kicking and screaming and frothing at the mouth. Anderson said he never had so much trouble getting a captured marine to leave their prison.”

“You’re used to people being very impressed with you.”

Shepard shook her head. “That’s you, not me.”

“I don’t—”

“That too-cool attitude? Never a hair out of place? That’s practiced. That’s giving more of a damn than I ever have.” Shepard crossed her arms. “What do you think is going to happen if you show some kind of genuine emotional response?”

Something unreadable crossed Miranda’s face. She turned back to the hatch console without a word.

The prison block was a mess. The guards activated mechs to repel the assault, including a heavy mech complete with rocket launcher. Firing rockets inside a thin-skinned hauler was inexcusably insane. The absurd scale of their response to two invaders, regardless of skill, would have made Shepard laugh— except that her and Miranda made progress. Neither the mercenaries nor their toys could stand in their way.

Eventually, as the map promised, they came to a control room overlooking the cryo facility. A single person staffing the site, dressed in a lab tunic, gave them one hard look and ran. Shepard let him. Her attention shifted to the tanks beyond the window. The prison possessed about ten in total, only a half dozen occupied. This sort of storage cost too much to waste on all but the most intractable cases.

Shepard tried the terminal. “He locked the controls. Damn it.”

Miranda wedged in beside her and checked the system. “There’s an override protocol. But we’ll open every cell block on this ship.”

“Why would an override like that exist?”

“It’s probably a safety protocol. In case of fire, or attack.” Miranda gave her a dubious glance. “We’ll have to fight guards and prisoners alike to get back to the ship.”

She shrugged. “Your package. Your call.”

Miranda pursed her lips. “I’m not going back to the Illusive Man empty-handed.”
“Can’t stomach disappointing him again?” Shepard couldn’t have bit back her tongue for all the credits in Cerberus’ accounts.

“Neither of us can.” Miranda still looked troubled, shadows chasing across her face. It hadn’t occurred to Shepard until then to wonder about the intricacies of Miranda’s employment. Miranda was the sort of person who’d obviously grown up with so much money that it ceased to have meaning; she wasn’t motivated by salary, even in exile from her family. And the Illusive Man’s expectations were beyond demanding.

Her eyes narrowed. There was something more, though. Not anything scandalous. Earnest. Failure was personal. Pride was at stake. Miranda said Cerberus saved her— so that was a debt owed, as well. Conveniently for her boss, the kind that could never be repaid.

Miranda reached for the controls. “I’m bringing Jack out of cryostasis.”

Alarms blared throughout the ship. One of those giant robotic arms swung down and twisted a capsule. Then it clenched the lid on either side and pulled up the pod.

A woman stood strapped to a backboard, bound at ankles, wrists, and neck by metal cuffs. She was shorter than Shepard expected, and younger too. The restraint at her neck forced her chin upwards. Her stick-thin body seemed too slight to support her head, which was shaved into a pattern, exposing tattoos that decorated every square inch of her skin with the exception of her face. That canvas was reserved for a garish layer of cosmetics— blue shadow, heavy mascara, enough red lipstick to frost a cake.

All in all, it amounted to a deliberate and off-putting display, one that demanded to be viewed but never touched.

Clunky footsteps came from beneath the control room, shaking the floor. Shepard glanced down, though there was no way to see the cause. “Sounds like mechs headed our way. Heavies.”

“Her way.” Miranda nodded at the glass. “They don’t want us to claim her. They don’t want her loose at all.”

Below, the prisoner creaked open her eyes, and started awake. Her head swung wildly for a moment, trying to get her bearings, restricted by the restraints. She turned furious eyes on the metal cuffs, and slowly, impossibly, those matchstick arms pried themselves loose and then wrenched open the ones about her neck and ankles. She stumbled forward.

Shepard leaned towards the window. “There’s three heavy mechs down there. We need to move.”

Jack lifted her head, took stock of the mechs, and her mouth twisted with impatience and rage. Her entire body glowed blue. Then she let out a guttural scream and launched a savage biotic attack on the mechs.

There was no warning, no time to prepare. Something deep inside Shepard’s head exploded and everything went black.

Fingers clawing at her shoulder. Shaking her. Muffled words like distant bombs. The only thing that save her retching was a stomach knot so huge and involved that it wouldn’t let anything by.

Shepard groaned, and put her hand to her brow. “Fuck.”

“You fainted.” Miranda didn’t disguise her concern. “Did you hit your head?”
“No.” She started to sit up, and aborted it just as quickly. Licked her lips and tasted blood. “My skull’s ringing like a gong, though.”

Miranda made an annoyed noise, and offered her hand. “Medical horror or no, you have got to get control of this reaction.”

“You’re the one who stuffed me with these cybernetics.” But she accepted the help, sitting up with a shudder. “Damn it, it’s all through my body. Where the hell does Jack get that kind of biotic strength?”

“Your other implant sites hurt?” Miranda was alarmed.

“Sometimes. Just now, I’ve got lit kerosene racing down every nerve.”

“We woke you too early.” She shook her head. “But we never meant for you to go from coma to commander in a matter of days. I tried to tell the Illusive Man—”

“What, you needed more time to poke at me with knives and needles?” She hadn’t intended to say anything so antagonistic, but in this state it was hard to be charitable.

Miranda made a visible effort to swallow her growing irritation. “That we developed physical and psychological acclimation routines for a reason. You should consider availing yourself of them.”

Shepard roundly ignored this comment, and levered herself to her feet with another groan. “We need to find your pet.”

Miranda wasn’t willing to let it go that easily. “You can’t fix this by logging endless hours on a treadmill.”

She was put out. She’d made a real effort lately to limit her time. “I do not log—”

“You’re on that thing all hours, day and night,” she snapped. “Do you really not know that even ordinary cybernetics need constant calibration in the first few months? Or that excessive physical activity exacerbates the problem?”

“Ordinary cybernetics.” The words hung flatly in the air.

“It shouldn’t shock you that Cerberus labs developed specialized hardware for such a complicated case.” She rubbed her forehead. “Doctors Chakwas and Solus are a good start, but it’s not enough. You have to let me help you.”

Shepard was out of patience. “Or you could give Chakwas my complete patient files from Lazarus. Or don’t you even have them?”

“Even if we hadn’t destroyed the station, it’s not the same thing as experience. But it’s not about the reports. You want to stuff your fingers in your ears. As if all of this—” Miranda gestured at Shepard’s body, indicating her injuries and recent history, “—vanishes if you ignore it. It doesn’t work like that.”

A long, silent moment followed that declaration. Miranda struck uncomfortably close to truth. Finally, Shepard growled, “We can talk about this later. How do we find Jack?”

Miranda was just as sick of repeating this conversation. “Follow the path of destruction. Or I suppose we can just wait for you to pass out again. Then we’ll know we’re close.”
Shepard favored her with a disgusted glare and stomped down to the cryo lab, forcibly ignoring her throbbing head with every step.

All three heavy mechs were in pieces, a smoking ruin, completely unsalvageable. It gave even Shepard pause. “One person did this?”

“Jack won’t be able to operate with that sort of power for long,” Miranda said, the voice of personal experience, though she was likewise taken aback. “She must be enraged, to still be conscious after this.”

“Guess that explains why your boss wants her so bad.”

“You’re not seriously pretending to be content with that?” she asked, as they moved into the next block of cells, allowing the damage to mark the way. There was no need to hack the hatch here. Jack hadn’t left much of the wall.

“We get first dibs on her, right?” Shepard stepped over the pile of debris, her face shadowed in the red emergency lighting. Sirens were going off all over the ship. “So if she signs up, he doesn’t get her. It’s a damn sight better than cryo.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“One thing at a time.” Shepard paused, raising her rifle slightly. “Gunfire, up ahead. Shouting, too.”

“With the prisoners loose, the guards should have their hands full. They might ignore us if we don’t give them a reason to pay attention.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“I’m not.” Miranda stalked ahead, preparing for a fight. “Let’s go.”

The next block was a zoo. Guards formed up behind barricades built into the block’s floor, in case of just such a situation. The prisoners had found arms, stolen from dead guards, Shepard wagered. But they outnumbered the Suns. It was only a matter of time before they took the ship.

Assuming there was any ship left to take. Fires had broken out all over the block. God only knew what was burning, or how long it would take to reach the pipes running through the bulkhead, carrying O2 and worse.

Shepard waved away the smoke. “Damn it. We need to get the hell off the Purgatory.”

“We’ve got some time—”

“The SR-1 looked like this when I ran for the bridge, and she blew up less than ten minutes later.” Shepard peered ahead, and fired. A humanoid form fell out of cover. “This is a larger ship, but I won’t bet our lives on having a whole lot longer.”

They proceeded aft, killing those who blocked their path, doing their best to avoid most of the firefight in favor of speed. Jack had passed through here. Or at least, Shepard hoped nobody else could toss around those modular cell blocks like cardboard boxes. The guards called more mechs, heavies among them. Whatever else his sins, Kuril clearly knew how to turn a profit, to afford gear like this.

Shepard and Miranda made it to the rear hatch and found it unlocked, but jammed shut. It
could’ve been Jack’s work, though thus far she seemed singularly unconcerned with her own safety. Shepard’s money was on the guards. Isolating each block might be the only way to prevent the prisoners from organizing further.

She holstered her rifle and inspected the bulkhead over the door. “This is high security. Easier to go through the wall.”

Miranda tried the Normandy again, and got no response. Then they heard a voice behind them. “See, Mack, what did I tell you?”

Both women turned. Three prisoners in soot— and sweat-caked jumpsuits stood behind them, a little too close, blocking them against the wall. A different man, apparently Mack, sported a wide grin. He nodded at Miranda. “Why not leave something to the imagination, honey?”

“You don’t really mind,” said the third, elbowing Mack.

Miranda and Shepard exchanged a very tired glance. Miranda said, “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Feisty,” Mack joked, to hoots from his comrades. “Seems to me you’re outgunned and outnumbered.”

Shepard couldn’t hold her laughter any longer. She asked Miranda, “You want this?”

She gave them a scathing glance. “They’re beneath me.”

“You’ll be beneath us soon enough, bitch,” said the first prisoner, who then reached for his gun.

His hand wasn’t more than halfway to the weapon when Shepard’s fist closed around his arm. She swung him into a hold so fast he blurred, and carried the motion all the way through, snapping his arm before he even fully realized he was under attack. He let out a scream so shrill Miranda winced.

Shepard followed up with a knee between his legs, hard enough to do permanent damage. He collapsed. His friends were just starting to move. Shepard decked the one beside her.

The third was closer to Miranda, well inside her reach. He went for a knife instead of his pistol. Shepard thought that was surprisingly intelligent, for someone stupid enough to wind up here. Miranda kicked at his kidney, and he doubled over, low enough for her to bring her second heel down on the back of his head. He lost his grip and she kicked the knife away, and glanced to her right.

Shepard had her second opponent on the floor, groaning. She drew her pistol and shot each of them twice, six bullets in all. The groaning stopped.

Miranda crossed her arms. “Not sure it’s worth four billion credits, but you do alright.”

She barked a laugh. “We really don’t have time for this.”

“No, we don’t. The last door took too long and this one’s worse.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Shepard walked sideways along the wall until they came upon a half-dead guard. He looked up at her without much fear left. She squatted in front of him. “How’s it going?”
“Leave me alone,” he said, without much spirit. His hand pressed against an abdominal wound.

“Nasty business,” Miranda said, nodding to the injury.

He stared up, blearily. “I said fuck off.”

Shepard folded her hands, resting her arms on her knees. “Not until you tell your pals in the next block to open the damn door. So reinforcements can come through.”

The guard’s glare sharpened marginally. “Fuck. Off.”

“That door is your only way out, too. Or do you want to find out what vacuum tastes like?” Shepard cued up her omni-tool. It had worked on Korlus. No reason it wouldn’t again. “Some medi-gel would sure take the sting out. Clot the bleeding, too. Give you more of a chance.”

A chuckle, dry. But his eyes were fixed on Shepard’s arm, where her suit’s dispenser system waited for her command. Something like hope flickered in their depths. “This ship is going down. I’ll never get to an escape shuttle.”

“Not with that injury untreated.” Shepard crouched down beside Miranda and held out her omni-tool. “So?”

He raised his free hand to his comm. “Yeah. Block 21 is clear. Prisoners neutralized.” He paused. “Yes. Open the hatch. Reinforcements inbound.”

His arm fell to his side as if the call stole the last of his strength. “Do it.”

Shepard pulsed medi-gel into her palm, pried his hand from the wound with surprising gentleness, and smeared it in before more than a small trickle of blood could spill. She held her own hand there for a few moments as the gel set. “You should go now. It’ll hurt, but it’s a lot better than being dead.”

“They’ll kill me when they find out I let you through.”

She shrugged. “So get on a shuttle alone. What do you owe people who’d treat you like that?”

He hesitated, and then lumbered to his feet with Shepard’s help, and stumbled off. Miranda rose and watched him go. “Why care about him?”

“I don’t,” she said. “Hatch should be open by now. Let’s move.”

In Block 22, they found no prisoners, but a whole host of guards. Almost as though Kuril had recalled every merc able to reach the block to defend his location. The warden himself stood on a platform at the back, hoisting a high-powered rifle and protected by the same mass effect field bubble they used to separate prisoners. Miranda sneered at the sight.

Shepard scanned the twenty-odd guns pointed at their heads. She made a face.

Kuril addressed them. “You’re valuable Shepard. But you’re too much trouble. At least I can still recover Jack.”

“You think so?” Shepard’s voice rose, part anger, and part to reach all the way across the block. “You’ll never get the fire under control before this blows up in your face. Literally.”

“I’ve depressurized half the blocks to get the fires out.”
“But not on this side. Not when you could kill Jack. And maybe me. Greed springs eternal, right?”

Kuril laughed. “The cells are explosion-proof. Looking better all the time, eh, Shepard?”

Miranda spoke in an undertone. “He can’t fire from inside that barrier.”

“He has his buddies here for that,” she hissed back. Shepard took a breath and raised her voice again. “You want Jack? Let me get her.”

Miranda’s mouth dropped open. Even Kuril paused. “Why?”

“I want off this ship, too. I’ll trade you Jack.” Shepard crossed her arms, sat back on her heel. “I came to take her away from you. That’ll count for something with her. How many more men can you afford to lose?”

“I think you don’t know her very well. Jack’s the meanest ball of crazy I’ve ever met.” But Kuril’s mandibles drew close to his face, as he chewed it over. “But I’ll let you try. In five minutes, I’m venting the compartment.”

Shepard started walking, dismissing Kuril from her world before he was even done speaking. Miranda jogged a few steps to catch up. “You have a plan?”

“Something like that.” Her steps were very deliberate. Just by the way she walked, the way she held her head, heaped scorn on the guards who tracked their movements with eyes and scopes alike. “I’m playing a hunch. If you like prayer, this might be a good time.”

“I’ve always found self-reliance more predictable.”

Shepard’s mouth twitched. “Me, too.”

The hatch deposited them at the aft end of the main concourse, several airlocks away from the forward dock. Shepard had no idea how Jack made it past Kuril. Maybe she ran through before he’d arrived himself, or gathered the bulk of his force. But this was as far the ship went. Beyond this point lay only vacuum and death.

Jack knew it, too. She paced furiously, growling, flinging balls of dark energy into the glass, every inch the type who belonged here. Blue Suns corpses littered the floor around her like broken dolls. No rationality existed beneath that surface.

Hell, she was barely dressed— pants rolled so low over her hips it qualified as pubic rather than pelvic, and only a thin leather strap across her nipples and her plethora of tattoos concealed her torso. She looked like a walking tantrum.

Miranda tossed her hair and folded her arms, hanging back. Shepard hoped she’d keep her mouth shut until this was over. She moved a few steps forward. “Jack—”

The girl turned to them, brown eyes blazing, and hurled one of the bodies with a gesture, and Shepard’s head twinged again. She couldn’t imagine from what well of pent-up rage she found the energy, after laying waste to much of the ship.

She stepped aside, allowing the projectile to pass harmlessly. “I’m Shepard. I’m here to get you off this ship.”

“Yeah?” Jack stomped forward, all aggression. “How’s that?”
Shepard smiled, and pointed.

Miranda turned in place. Whatever petty contempt she felt for Jack evaporated into total disbelief. Beyond the glass, the Normandy SR-2 drifted into view on an approach trajectory.

Her eyes cut to Shepard. “How?”

Shepard shrugged. “Chakwas and Mordin mapped my cybernetics. They couldn’t shut up about the unusual signatures this circuitry gives off. We fell out of contact. Chakwas wasn’t going to lose me twice.”

Realization dawned. “She fed the scan to EDI.”

“Like I said. A hunch.”

Jack frowned at them, confused, and her head swung towards the window. She let out a guttural yell upon sighting the ship’s insignia. Her hands balled into fists. “Cerberus!”

She spat it like a curse as the Normandy’s docking tube extended towards the ship’s little-used aft dock, and swung back to Shepard. “What the fuck?”

“Yeah. That was about my reaction, too.” Shepard sat back on her heel. “Here’s the deal. That airlock leads out of this shithole. The hatch behind me leads back to Kuril. It’s your choice.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you. You’re Cerberus.”

“I’m not.”

Jack jerked her chin at Miranda. “She sure as fuck is.”

Miranda opened her mouth. Shepard raised her hand, cautioning silence. “You can’t share a cab ride out of hell?”

“They’ve been on my ass for years. Any time I escape, they put such a huge bounty on my head that half the galaxy’s gunning for me.” She took another step. “I won’t deliver myself gift-wrapped.”

That was when Shepard stared at Miranda. She sighed. “She’s stolen Cerberus property and killed Cerberus people. He wants her to work off her debt.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “You die first.”

Shepard raked her fingers through her hair, still focused on Miranda. “You could have told me this.”

“Like you believe anything I say.”

She made a sound of exasperation, but empty of anger. This was just business as usual. She rounded on Jack. “We’re on the same page about the Illusive Man. You can keep running, or you can come with me, and wait.”

“I’ve waited a long time.”

“No. You’ve been surviving a long time. Dreaming. I bet you even dreamed about it in cryo—what you’d do when you finally got enough of an angle to stand and fight.” Shepard stood up straight. “Come with me and maybe we’ll both get what we want.”
“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I never do.”

Not a muscle moved on Jack’s face. “I want free access to any Cerberus databases linked into your ship. See what they’ve got on me.”

“No,” Miranda said, immediately.

Shepard gave her a quelling glare. “I’ll give you full access.”

Miranda couldn’t hold her tongue. Shepard wasn’t surprised. She was already on thin ice with the Illusive Man, and beyond that, her loyalty to Cerberus wouldn’t permit a violent avowed enemy loose in their files. “Shepard, you’re not authorized to do that.”

“Nice.” Jack grinned, nastily. “It upsets the cheerleader. Even better.”

“Move out,” Shepard said.

Joker spun around in his couch as they boarded. “Hey, Commander. You’re spending so much time with the Blue Suns we’re worried about you signing up.”

She rolled her eyes. “Pull back to a safe firing range and put two torpedoes into that ship.”

“Seriously?” At her nod, he punched the air. “Yes! I’ve been dying to give the cannon a whirl.”

“I’ll be in the comm room. Let me know when it’s done.”

Miranda hurried after, ignoring the open stares from the staff in the CIC. “I don’t care what you do to the Purgatory, but you can’t let her into those systems.”

Jack laughed. Shepard was unconcerned. “Don’t worry. I’ll ask EDI to set it up.”

They entered the comm room, a place of relative privacy, away from the crew’s curiosity. Shepard looked between them. “Let’s have this out now, because I won’t have insubordination or turf wars disrupting the order of my ship.”

“Happy to.” Miranda folded her hands behind her back and stepped in front of Jack. “I’m Miranda Lawson, Shepard’s second in command. As she just made clear, on this ship we follow orders.”

Jack’s lip curled. “Tell the Cerberus shill to back off. I want those accesses, or I’m out.”

Shepard cast her eyes towards the ceiling. “EDI.”

EDI manifested on the desk. “Yes, Shepard.”

“Please set up our newest recruit with all the accounts she requires.” She leveled her gaze at Miranda. “As a valued member of the team.”

EDI’s sphere gave one pulse, a line of lights running down the globe. “I will need Jack to visit my server room to collect relevant biometric data.”

Shepard shrugged at Jack. “Can’t change the hardware. Not out here.”

The ship shivered, just enough to let them know the cannon had fired. EDI’s blue lights flickered again. “Confirmed target ship Purgatory destroyed. Several escape shuttles were outside the blast.
“No need to pursue.” Shepard glanced at Jack. “Let me know what you find.”

A horrible grin came over her face. She leaned towards Miranda with a soft, sing-song hiss. “Hear that, precious? We’re going to be good friends. Me, you, and every little dirty secret.”

Jack spun on her heel and stalked out of the room.

Miranda’s eyes glinted sharp and hard. She opened her mouth. Shepard held up her hand. “May I speak?”

She shook her head, every motion rigid with disapproval, but she held her silence.

“First,” Shepard said, aiming for reasonable, “I really do need someone to go through those files.”

Miranda jabbed her finger at the hatch. “And you pick her?”

“I need someone motivated to comb through minutiae and able to provide an outside perspective. Put simply, you know what Cerberus thinks is important, and how Cerberus believes those pieces fit together.” Shepard paused for breath. “As I do not believe Cerberus is infallible, and the Collectors currently hold every possible advantage, I see benefit in a second opinion.”

“She walked into your life five minutes ago. You trust her—”

“I trust her self-interest. Besides, as you said yourself, Cerberus operates in cells, and limits information on that basis. Jack is now part of Lazarus Cell and entitled to Lazarus intel. The risk to your organization should be minimal.”

Miranda’s mouth thinned. “And your other reasons?”

At which point, Shepard realized she lacked other reasons, at least conscious ones. It was just a gut feel. More slowly, she said, “Jack is a kid.”

“She’s twenty-four and she destroyed an entire facility for the sheer joy of killing Cerberus agents. God knows what she’ll do with a whole ship of us and free rein.”

“She’s a kid with violent tendencies.” Shepard tried to parse the thoughts that started stewing when she first saw Jack in cryo. “Look, I’ve got some experience with violent people and I think you do, too. Is this how people who solve their problems with violence behave? The overkill? The randomness? The hissy fits?”

“Some people just like killing, and they look for excuses.”

“But they’re smart about it, right? Even the dead stupid ones aren’t turned up all the time. They use violence for control, and nothing about what I saw on the Purgatory was controlled.” Shepard shook her head. “Everything about her screams aggression, how she looks, how she talks, defaulting to overwhelming force. It says ‘back off’, not ‘come at me’. We’re not dealing with someone who’s angry. We’re dealing with someone who’s scared.”

Miranda scoffed. “And giving her access to highly sensitive intel, information Cerberus bought dearly, makes her less scared?”

“It focuses her on something I know about while we get used to each other. Something I understand.” Shepard raised an eyebrow. “Would you prefer leaving her to her own devices?”
"I hope you know what you’re doing.” Miranda had seldom sounded more jaded.

“I can manage Jack. But you should keep out of her way.” Shep ard nodded at the hatch. “Let’s see what she does with this access.”

“You’re not worried about the element of chaos inherent in that strategy?”

“I’m surprised you are.” Shep ard offered her a lopsided smile. “It’s the same strategy your boss used with me.”
Shepard sat with her knees to her chin, staring out into the dark. The faint light from her aquarium at night gave every object in her cabin a thin limb of illumination, profiling it and deepening the shadows elsewhere. Like something out of a badly shaded cartoon.

The holographic clock imbedded in her stereo interface read 2:36 AM. She hadn’t yet figured out how to set it to military time. As she watched, it clicked over to 2:37.

This was early, even for her. At one point in time she was used to that. Since her resurrection, everything about simply being alive seemed just a little bit harder. More sleep, more food, more time to work through things. But that wasn’t always possible. Sometimes, going to sleep felt too much like that lab, rousing ever so slightly to a fuzzy world of pain and tubes, an indifferent tech sending her back before she could fight, to face it all over again.

Her loudspeaker activated. EDI. “Commander Shepard, you have a priority message waiting in the comm room.”

It startled her out of her reverie. “Sorry, what?”

Mordin had removed most of EDI’s spyholes to her cabin, including all the video sensors, and limited the capabilities of the audio sensor. It was now much more similar to Shepard’s experience of VIs aboard the previous Normandy and other ships. EDI’s lack of expressed frustration with the new status quo was eerie, particularly given how close to human she seemed much of the time. “There is a priority message waiting in the comm room.”

She hauled herself upright, feet on the floor, running her hands over her face, trying to wake up. On the coffee table, the picture from Abael flared to life and blinded her. Shepard stood, blinking stars from her eyes, and stumbled towards the clothes bureau built into the cabin’s bulkhead. “What kind of message?”

“Collectors have attacked the colony of Ferris Fields.” EDI initiated gradual illumination of the room.

“Shit.” She pulled a clean shirt over her head. “When?”

“The first distress signals were received at neighboring colonies at 0214.”

“Distress signals?” Every other colony had simply gone silent, there being nobody left to call for help. “There are survivors?”

“The Illusive Man wishes to inform you personally. If you would proceed to the comm room, I am certain he can address your questions.”

Double shit. Shepard buttoned up her jeans and headed for the elevator in her bare feet.

She half-expected to find Miranda waiting outside the comm room, but she entered alone. The table retracted into the floor, revealing a holopad for transmitting her image, faintly warm beneath her soles. She wiggled her toes into it as she waited for the visual to load.

The Illusive Man had kept his distance since Freedom’s Progress. She assumed he had routine
contact with Miranda, in addition to the automated reports from EDI, and apparently that filled his need for information. Or he was playing exactly the same game she was with Jack. Give her a nominal task, and wait to see what she did with it.

He looked the same. Same office, possibly a different suit but in the same expensive style. Same brand of cigarette perched in one hand. Smoke spiraled about his head. “Shepard. My apologies for the early wake-up. I understand you’re still recovering from your… procedure.”

That was such an obvious barb even Shepard’s notorious temper was able to ignore it with zero effort given. “Ferris Fields was attacked?”

“Yes.” He took another drag, and glanced down at a small holo hovering near the arm of his chair. “At approximately 1945 yesterday evening, the Collectors began their assault of Ferris Fields. They were supported by a cruiser-class spacecraft similar to the one glimpsed in video surveillance from Freedom’s Progress.”

“This is a detailed account. EDI suggested there are survivors?” Her brain woke up a little more, recalling a few factoids from the deluge of information on her two missing years. “Ferris Fields is along the disputed border with the Traverse. Were there any Alliance?”

“Only the central settlement was affected. Outlying posts observed the attack remotely and relayed what little information they could glean to the comm buoy system once the communications blackout ended. From their reports, we know the colony sustained the attack for over six hours. The Alliance mounted a defense of the outlying areas but lacked the numbers to drive the Collectors from the heart of the colony.”

“I’ll relay this to navigation immediately. First person accounts will be invaluable to our investigation.”

“I’ve got people there already, collecting data and conducting interviews in a more subtle fashion.” He gestured at her. “This may not be obvious to you, but landing the Normandy SR-2 in the middle of an Alliance garrison, however small, may be unwise.”

That she might be unwelcome anywhere due to an Alliance presence stung. Shepard grit her teeth. “How do we get the unfiltered data?”

He didn’t miss her slight emphasis on unfiltered, and actually smiled. “We don’t have time to waste. I’m sending representatives to Sanctum, in Sigurd’s Cradle. You’ll rendezvous there.”

Her brow furrowed. Aria said the Suns ran their ops through Sanctum. “That’s a mining world.”

“And conveniently located.”

“It’s two relays from here. Omega is one.”

“Omega is being eaten alive by turf wars. In retrieving Garrus Vakarian, you destroyed all semblance of leadership within the merc gangs, but barely made a dent in the ranks. Off-world leadership hasn’t made much progress asserting order.”

“So I’m not welcome there, either.” She ran her hand backwards through her hair. Her voice turned biting. “Are we going to the colony on Sanctum, or do you have a little post of your own there?”

“The colony.” His eyes narrowed. “It shouldn’t surprise you that we have people in most human settlements throughout the Terminus. Right now, they’re working for you, same as the intelligence
divisions within the Alliance navy did while you chased Saren.”

“I never liked the gremlins myself. Too nervy.”

“I imagine not.”

They stared at each other for several beats, him puffing away on his cigarette, her crossing her arms and sitting back on her heel. She said, “Is keeping me away from Ferris Fields about politics, or about me and you?”

“I’m a busy man. I multitask.” He hit a button on his haptic control pad, and the comm room went dark as the connection cut out.

Shepard counted that a small victory, and went into the CIC.

Most of the ship was asleep. She was of two minds on that. There wasn’t enough crew to run two full watches, let alone the three standard to all but the largest Alliance ships. But EDI did an excellent job of keeping watch on her own.

She found her second watch navigator, Vadim Rolston, standing his post and trying to blink the grit out of his eyes. As the highest-ranked Cerberus person while she and Miranda slept, he also had the deck overnight. “Good morning, ma’am.”

“We have a crewman from Ferris Fields, right?” Among the ten million pieces of new information she was trying to assimilate, Shepard was familiarizing herself with the crew. She had an excellent memory, but between years of missing history, the new ship, the new mission, the Terminus Systems, her crew and her entire ruined life, there were only so many spare minutes in the day.

“Richard Hadley. His brother still lives there.” Rolston started. “Did something—”

Shepard wanted to tell him first, before announcing it to the rest of the ship. “Please wake Crewman Hadley and have him come to the comm room.”

She started to return there herself, and paused. “Does Hadley have any friends on board? Anyone he’s particularly close to?”

His brow knotted. “Matthews.”

“Wake him up, too.” Another thought. “Don’t say anything, just send them up.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Rolston reached for her console.

As Shepard waited at the conference table, tapping her fingers against the mahogany, EDI said, “In the future, I would be pleased to assist with relaying messages to the crew.”

“It’s best if everyone sticks to their own role.” She put her bare feet up on an adjacent chair and folded her arms over her stomach. Relaying this kind of news left her with a restless, angry frustration, like she should have been able to do something but was actually powerless. She had never subscribed to the philosophy that people should just accept the awful things that happen to them because some awfulness was inevitable in life. Nobody should ever get woken up in the middle of the night to hear their home was gone.

EDI was nonplussed, which was an interesting phenomenon in its own right, coming from an AI. “I am not sure what you mean by ‘our own roles’. I am fully capable of performing this function.”
“Would you like it if Rolston took over monitoring our electronic warfare suite for threats?”

“Crewman Rolston lacks the necessary skills—”

“Pretend he doesn’t. How would that make you feel?”

“I lack sentimental reactions.”

Shepard didn’t believe that for a second. “Stop evading the question. If I took that away from you, how would you react?”

“Since there is no logical reason to give operation of our cyberwarfare package to a human crewmember, I would question why you did not trust me.” A pause. “Oh. I see.”

“Yeah. Everyone needs to be allowed to do their job.”

“Crewmen Hadley and Matthews are exiting the elevator now.”

Shepard closed her eyes a moment, and then stood up.

The two men entered, bewildered and exhausted. Shepard gestured at the seats. “Please, sit. I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

It went about as well as could be expected. Hadley was upset, and Matthews both on his behalf and generally, as they all were any time a colony got hit. Then she had to explain that they weren’t going to Ferris Fields, and the shock turned to anger. Shepard sympathized; it was exactly what she’d want, in his shoes. It was hard to find an explanation he’d accept for why that wasn’t the best strategy. Especially because the real explanation was the Illusive Man playing some kind of long, strange game with her, and she didn’t have time to screw around with it right now.

So she told them more-or-less what the Illusive Man told her—that they couldn’t make trouble with the Alliance, and it would be faster to get the information at Sanctum. Eventually, he accepted it, even if he didn’t agree.

By then it was past 0330. In the empty comm room, Shepard fished around in her jeans pocket, and found the flattened packet of cigarettes she lifted from Sergeant Cathka on Omega. Only after she extracted one did she realize she didn’t have a light, and that furthermore, spaceships were deliberately designed to be bereft of fire-making apparatus.

The lab, she decided at last. Even Mordin wasn’t awake at this hour. Shepard never took formal chemistry; she was home schooled via the extranet until fifteen, and it wasn’t a graduation requirement on Mars. So it took her longer than she’d willingly admit to figure out how to light the burner. A pair of flimsy tongs and a rough steel bar soldered into a metal box wasn’t how she’d create a spark. But she got the cigarette lit, enjoyed a long, well-earned drag, extinguished the burner, and made for the bridge.

When she turned into the alcove between the lab and the CIC, she nearly ran over Kasumi. Or rather, a large canvas with Kasumi standing behind it. “What the hell?”

“Good morning to you, too, Shep.” Kasumi scooted out of the way.

Shepard noticed then the pair of magnetic hooks affixed to the bulkhead. “Who redecorates in the middle of the night?”

“It’s the best time. Nobody to get in the way.” She cocked her head. “Well, usually.” She hefted
the canvas again, nearly as long as she was tall, and carefully set it into place. “There.”

Shepard took it in. “You’ve got a painting of two donuts floating in a pool of blood.”

Kasumi gave her a look of awed disgust, like she couldn’t have imagined such uneducated taste. “What? No. It’s abstract. I thought I’d brighten up the place. Say what you like about paramilitary efficiency, this ship is drab.”

“I’m not sure blood is the best imagery for elevating the mood.” She took another drag off the cigarette. No way was she letting it go out after that effort.

“I bet you see blood in everything,” she harrumphed. “This was done for me by a little girl. A child prodigy from Elysium, cute as anything. I’ll never forget what it felt like to watch her work.”

Her tone was reverential. Shepard folded her arms, and tried to see the painting as Kasumi did. “She painted it for you specifically?”

Kasumi turned back towards the canvas, her face disappearing into the shadows of her hood. “Curiosities attract attention. Slavers, in her case, hoping to sell her to a different sort of collector. I posed as a buyer’s rep to get onto their ship, and smuggled her out. She painted it for me on the way back.”

Shepard blinked, startled. Heroics weren’t Kasumi’s usual speed. “You have some hidden depths, I’ll give you that.”

“People who steal for the money are seldom any good at it. No appreciation for the craft. Or the real value of what they’re stealing.” Then she looked at Shepard, just enough to see the corner of her mouth curve up. “Keiji and I would keep our favorite pieces. Especially if we thought the client wouldn’t appreciate it properly.”

Shepard gave the painting a final glance. It wasn’t her style, and it wasn’t customary for a warship, but it beat a bare wall. “Carry on.”

Kasumi tossed her a facetious salute. Shepard shook her head and continued on to the bridge.

For once, Joker was asleep. Shepard slid into the co-pilot’s couch without disturbing him. Outside the port, the cold black of interstellar space revolved slowly as the ship turned, the smoke from her cigarette curling over the glass. Joker parked them out here, away from any possible Blue Suns who came to find out what happened to the Purgatory, until they had a real destination. Osun remained the brightest star in the sky. They were in the Hourglass Nebula, long famous on Earth. Just three generations ago, nobody dreamed any human might visit it in their lifetime, or ever.

Shepard never felt diminished by the vastness of space. Never felt small. Sometimes, this was the only place in the galaxy she felt connected to anything, like she was a part of the universe. Maybe she was just exhausted, maybe it had been a weird morning, but sitting there in the silence, smoking and waiting for Joker to wake, was very nearly peaceful. An oasis in a storm.

He stirred forty or fifty minutes later, at a gentle buzzing from the pilot’s console. He squinted at the display.

“Hi,” Shepard said.

He half jumped out of his skin. “What the hell?”

“We need to change course.”
“You were just sitting there, watching me sleep?”

“It’s not an emergency.” Shepard was mildly amused. “I thought you could use the rest.”

“You’re one to talk,” he grumbled.

“Hey, I have been getting plenty of sleep this mission. Not having a Prothean vision playing over and over in my head helps.”

“Are you?” he asked, waving off the lingering haze of smoke. “Or is it just easier hiding in your quarters?”

“I’m sleeping. Honest.” She leaned forward and set the long-spent cigarette on the dash.

Joker’s glare was all reproach. “You will clean that up.”

Shepard drew her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs. “EDI woke me up early today. Ferris Fields was attacked.”

His face slouched into chagrin followed by resignation. “Shit.”

“That about sums it up.” She rested her cheek on her knees. “We’re not moving fast enough, but I don’t have any real leads to chase. Maybe the Cerberus team on site will give us something. We’re meeting them on Sanctum.”

“Doesn’t feel much like the old days, does it.”

“No.” She picked at a loose thread on the hem of her jeans. “You do anything fun on the Citadel?”

“Garrus took me to some bar C-Sec cops like to visit. Drinks were piss but that wasn’t the point.” He glanced over at her. “You?”

“I saw Anderson. He hasn’t changed much.” She gestured at the ship. “He had less to say about all this than I expected. Almost like he already knew, but didn’t believe it.”

“Maybe he did. He’s a councilor now. They get access to all kinds of crazy shit.”

She shook her head. “Neither the Alliance nor the Council had any idea the Collectors are staging these attacks. Intelligence in the Terminus has always been crap.”

He glanced at EDI’s dormant projector. “You know the overlord can still hear you, right?”

She shrugged. “If Cerberus has a problem with me informing the Council or the navy about our activities, they should’ve picked someone else.”

It was the same line she’d used many times when the Alliance disapproved of her decisions as a spectre. Joker continued adjusting their navigation to plot a course to Sanctum. Shepard kept watching the stars. After a few minutes, because she wasn’t sure who else she had to tell, she said, “I went to see Kaidan.”

He paused, just for a second, and then returned to his task with a feigned nonchalance. “How did that go?”

“It didn’t. He’s deployed.”
“That figures.”

“Yeah.” She ran her fingers through her hair. Joker couldn’t possibly be interested in this, but something in her had to talk about it. Get it out of her head. “He’s still living in the apartment we rented together, but it’s not mine anymore. It’s his.”

“You weren’t here. The world didn’t stop.”

“I know that.” She blew out a breath exasperated, and tried to find better words. “You know the whole multiverse thing?”

“The what now?”

“The thing— the physics thing—the one that says every possibility comes true somewhere. It was like I was living on one probability path and got dropped into the other. Everything in that apartment was like I died. And not recently. A long time ago.”

He gave her a level look. “Well, you did.”

“I didn’t. I’m here.” It sounded lost even to her ears. “If even Kaidan gave up on me…”

“What else was he supposed to do? I saw you hit the launch switch, and I saw the ship blow up not even a minute later from the port on my escape shuttle. And Kaidan…” Joker’s mouth thinned into a line. He shook his head.

“What about Kaidan?”

His mouth twitched, uncomfortable. “On the first anniversary of the Normandy attack, the Alliance made all the surviving crew do a big PR thing. Corresponded with rolling out some bullshit composite VI of you doing recruitment ads—”

She was aghast. “Recruitment ads?”

He waved her off—it didn’t matter. “Brass paraded us onto some talk show to do a commemorative interview. I think Kaidan weighed eating the 95, I really do.”

In the Alliance uniform code of military justice, article 95 was failure to obey an order, not one of the lighter offenses. And the navy didn’t distinguish between an order like this and one concerning life and death. Shepard’s frown deepened. Joker continued, “You know how he is. He doesn’t say shit if he doesn’t want to. The host tried everything to get him to participate and he kept giving her polite one-word non-answers.”

She looked up and smiled a little, out into the port, into the stars. “That sounds like him.”

“Afterwards, we tried to catch up. The crap postings we’d had since the Normandy, people we hadn’t seen in a while, even a little about Alchera. But nothing about you.” Joker wrinkled his nose. “A full year later, and he couldn’t even say your name.”

For a moment, she couldn’t speak, either. She licked her lips. “Why would you tell me that?”

“I don’t know what deals he had to make with himself to crawl out of that hole. But don’t say he gave up on you.” He took a breath, and turned back to the console. “At least not to me.”

“I really did try to see him.”

“I never said you didn’t.” He straightened in his chair, busying himself with the controls. “So,
Sanctum. We already did the burning trash-fire hell on Korlus, so if we visit the snowed-under pollution pit hell, we’ll be two for two.”

Shepard was just as glad for a return to business. “I aim to keep your passport interesting.”

“I don’t think they use those in the Terminus.”

The comm staticked itself to life. “Commander Shepard, I need you in the CIC right now.”

It was Kelly, with a slightly panicked edge to her voice, difficult to place. Shepard glanced from the comm to Joker and shrugged. “I’ll catch you later. Scan for any Suns presence when we get back in-system. It would be good know how much they valued Kuril’s operation.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Shepard levered herself out of the seat and went to the CIC, which had slowly populated as first watch woke up. Kelly was positively bereft. She swallowed, once, as Shepard approached.

Shepard assumed it was Ferris Fields. “Look, it’s rough every time a colony gets hit, but we’re not wasting it. We’ll learn as much as we can and be that much closer to stopping the Collectors.”

Confusion crossed her face. “What? Who did we lose?”

“Ferris Fields.” Shepard’s brow furrowed. “What did you want to talk about?”

Kelly stared down at something in her hands. “I found him on the elevator.”

Lying across her palms was the newest and ugliest fish, the one Kelly bought for her aboard the Citadel. Shepard blinked. “How in the hell did it get out of the tank?”

“There are holes in the back. For the filter.” Kelly sniffled. “He must have jumped out. Why would he do that?”

“But all the way to the elevator?” Another thought. “How’d it get through the hatch?”

Kelly made a small noise. Shepard tore enough of her attention from the minor mystery of the fish’s escape to notice her yeoman was unreasonably upset. “Maybe there was… stuff in the water it didn’t like. Different from its old tank.”

“I did everything the store told me before I put him there.”

Shepard tried to muster a little compassion and patience. “Here, give it… him… to me and I’ll disp— take care of it.”

She reached for the fish. As her fingers touched it, he twitched.

Kelly screamed and dropped it on the floor. It landed on its back, wriggled twice to right itself, and snaked towards the main console at surprising speed, dragging itself along with its two front fins like improvised feet.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Shepard swooped down and grabbed it just as its head vanished beneath the console.

The fish put up a spirited fight, but it had been out the water long enough to lose most of its slime. She just barely managed to hold onto it. “What is this thing?”
“The clerk said it was catfish.” Kelly hovered behind her as she headed back to the elevator. “Is he hurt?”

Shepard looked down at the fish in disbelief. It glared back at her with two dark evil eyes and waved its whiskers, like something out of a B horror flick. She took a breath. “Kelly.”

The girl jerked her head up and stopped fussing with the fish. “Yes?”

“I’m going to put the fish back where it belongs. I need you to get a message ready for the crew about Ferris Fields. There’s going to be a lot of questions and I want to get it all out there at once, as soon as everyone’s awake. Understood?”

She composed herself and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Shepard stepped onto the elevator and the doors closed.

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Several hours out from Sanctum, Dr. Chakwas called Shepard down to med bay to review the initial results from her scans and tests. Shepard would have rather swallowed hot knives, but she buried it, and walked in with a pleasantly neutral expression fixed on her face. She used to have a knack for that, compartmentalization or at least concealment, and it was a relief to feel it coming back, a little at a time. It was how she managed the outer world.

Chakwas turned and offered a more genuine smile as she entered. “Commander.”

“Doctor.” Shepard noticed Mordin and Miranda had already arrived, and nodded to them both. “So what kind of radioactive goop do I have in me?”

“It’s not radioactive—” Miranda began, but a look from Chakwas silenced her.

“Have a seat,” the doctor said, gesturing to the spare chair at her desk.

Shepard sat on the desk itself instead. If Mordin and Miranda chose to stand, she wouldn’t have them towering over her. Her footing was unequal enough already.

Chakwas, unfazed, took her own seat and folded her hands. “We’ve already been through the tissue regrowth and substitutions, bones, organs, and the like. All of that is mundane. Standard medical practice for the last several decades at the least.”

“I’d rather just cut to the punchline.” Shepard crossed her arms over her stomach. “You found something that wasn’t standard medical practice.”

Chakwas’ eyes briefly slid to Miranda. “Yes. I’ve searched the literature and I believe there is no living patient on record who has been so extensively reconstructed. Tissue is one thing. That’s painstaking work, but again, mundane.”

“It’s the cybernetics.”

“Yes.” Chakwas pulled up a scan on her terminal. “The nervous system is one of several ways the disparate parts of your body communicate with each other. Some of it routes through the brain, and some of it is more localized, particularly in the digestive tract.”

Shepard rubbed her fingers into her elbows, trying not to look as nervous as she felt. “I’ve been famished since I woke up. Is that why?”
Miranda spoke up. “Unlikely. Your digestive system was mostly unaffected. You froze so quickly there wasn’t even much sepsis from your last meal. But we may have an alternative explanation for the increased appetite.”

Chakwas pointed at the scan. “As you see here, the blue lines are nerves original to your body.”

Shepard saw a mass of blue in the vicinity of her intestines, and other lines scattered across her body. “And the orange is the cybernetics? What’s different about them?”

“The extent of replacement alone might produce some odd effects.” Chakwas glanced at Miranda.

She took up the thread. “Unfortunately, cybernetics are meant for short, localized bridging within an intact nervous system. For damaged or prosthetic limbs, for example. We replaced over half your nerves including a large section of your spinal column that was irreparably severed in a post-mortem collision. Making all that work required new solutions. Your reconstruction was supported by multiple Cerberus labs, and many of your implants are entirely novel technology.”


Mordin entered the conversation. “Design shares many similarities with neural interface for mammalian biotic implants. Makes sense. Much more sophisticated and durable than common cybernetics.”

She leveled her gaze at Miranda. “You wired up my entire body like a biotic implant.”

But it was Mordin who answered, immediately, holding up his hands. “No. Nothing like that. Biotic implants work with neurons to harness flow of dark energy.” He sucked in a breath through his nostrils. “Cybernetic network terminates in brain, but without an implant to direct it, use as a control platform limited.”

Chakwas shot a look at both of them. Obviously, they’d discussed some kind of script, and it had run completely off the rails. “However, as an unintended side-effect, the artificial nerves are capable of channeling dark energy.”

Shepard straightened. “That’s why I keep getting knocked on my ass by relays.”

Miranda shook her head. “You’d need some kind of native biotic ability to sense it at all. It should have been an entirely benign effect. Undetectable.”

After the Battle of the Citadel in the summer of ‘83, the Normandy got orders to scan the Terminus for geth. It was a make-work assignment to get them out of Command’s hair and everyone was bored to death. One of the ways Kaidan passed the time was “practicing fine biotic control”—teasing her by floating objects and sneaking them up behind her. Much to his disappointment, she never fell for it. And Kaidan being Kaidan, that sparked his curiosity.

She cleared her throat. “My head used to buzz.”

Chakwas furrowed her brow. “Buzz?”

“Near the Conduit on the Presidium, or when someone would set off a biotic effect near me. A mild buzzing like I had a bee rattling around my skull.” She licked her lips, looked at them. “Kaidan suggested I might have… something, some kind of aptitude, but that’s ridiculous, right? I’ve never been able to do anything like that.”
Her three doctors exchanged a glance. Miranda spoke first. “We should be able to dial back the sensitivity. But too much will risk serious impairment. Biotic potential or not, you might benefit from some of the exercises used to train young biotics. More like five finger exercises for control of the nerves than generating biotic fields.”

Shepard thought about what Laine said. *You were glowing.*

“Oh.” She had seldom felt less off-balance in her life. Human biotics were almost exclusively identified by age five or six. Never older than about seventeen. There was no chance she could have gone thirty-one years without knowing. “Alright. Yeah. Let’s dial it down.”

Shepard spent an uncomfortable few hours as the doctors interfaced with her implants, adjusted the settings, and tested the results. She moved her body when they asked, wiggling fingers, twitching toes. Answered yes or no when Chakwas dropped ice water on her skin to test temperature perception. Barely noticed the tiny needle pricks for nociception which caused a bit of concern at first.

She stared up at the small spiderweb cracks in the med bay’s ceiling paint and waited for it to be over. Maybe there wasn’t anything she could know about herself anymore. She should stop grasping for something familiar. It was a huge waste of effort.

By the time they finally let her go, Joker was on his final approach to Sanctum. Shepard started back upstairs, to the CIC. Mordin followed her. Well, his lab was located on the same deck.

But as the elevator started to rise, he hit the stop. Shepard raised an eyebrow. “You know EDI can still hear us?”

“EDI useful. Better discernment than you think.” His inner lids flicked up over his eyes, leaving them glistening in the weak light. “But you mistake my meaning. Not the time for more debate. But thought you should know.”

A little bit of ice trickled down her neck. Probably directly into that spinal cybernetic suite, the one that looked like an ancient bug curled into her vertebrae with wires twisted into her spinal cord at both ends, like grasping tentacles. “Know what?”

“Artificial nervous system only partially derived from implant designs. Other parts unknown. Not human. Not salarian, asari. Never seen anything like it. Dark energy transmission efficiency off the charts.”

“Miranda said it was completely novel—”

He shook his head vigorously. Something had him disturbed, and Mordin was next to unflappable. “Even new technology shows fingerprints of its creators. These designs… logical, but alien. Merits further study, but premature speculation harmful.”

Shepard groped for some sanity. “But Miranda could explain. She developed it.”

“No.” He blinked again. “Miranda used implants developed at other Cerberus labs. Understanding not required for implementation. Could a surgeon build an electroblade?”

That was beyond troubling. She frowned. “Thank you.”

“Thought you should know.” Mordin restarted the elevator. “Suspect ignorance over malice, but unprofessional to leave patients uninformed.”
She thought about two years of nonconsensual surgery and reconstruction at the hands of Cerberus, including apparently numerous experimental treatments, and folded her arms. “I wish Cerberus recruited you sooner.”

A brief flash of a smile. “Cerberus didn’t recruit me. Commander Shepard did.”

He departed the elevator for his lab. Shepard watched him go, and then went to her terminal to issue orders for their docking.

The capital, Vulpes, looked more like a spaceport concourse than a city. Sanctum was one of the oldest human-dominated colonies in the Terminus, built in ’69, only a few years after humanity official joined Council space. Those new galactic laws had effectively stymied most human settlement beyond the Traverse, and even that expansion was controversial, as evidenced by the long war with the batarian Hegemony.

The docks were considerably dated, with brighter colors and more plastic than metal, and the militant lines and minimalist furnishings typical of the 2160s. The problem with plastic was grime adhered to it like nothing else, and the decades had not been kind. Everything was covered in film of gritty brown gunk, not that the natives seemed bothered. They were mostly miners, who spent their days in far worse climes than this, in the icefields that swallowed every inch of the planet aside from the narrow band of the equator.

Only a few stores graced the halls, and fewer windows. Shepard imagined the frequent ice storms made them expensive to maintain.

“Where are we headed?” she asked Miranda, as they made their way from the docks.

“The local headquarters for the Delta Pavonis Foundation.”

“That’s an Alliance-based corporation. They founded Demeter.” Shepard was taken aback. “How did Cerberus possibly get their claws into them?”

“Cerberus finances half this planet. In exchange for which, we get raw materials, a labor force, occasionally information, and a safe harbor in an unfriendly part of the galaxy. Most of the metal in the Normandy came from here.” Miranda raised her eyebrows. “What did you imagine happened when the Alliance bowed to Council demands and pulled support from Terminus colonies in the early days? Do you think any of them were self-sustaining?”

Shepard suffered that in silence. After a little further, Miranda said, “Their offices should be cleaner than this shithole. The corporate sector here is small, but well-kept. We can expect a warm reception.”

They rode an elevator up ten decks to the Foundation’s offices. A real human receptionist met them, offered them coffee, which Shepard accepted and Miranda declined, and led them through a maze of corridors to a private office.

“Ms. Alonso will be in shortly,” she said. “She apologizes for the delay and asks that you make yourselves comfortable.”

She left Shepard and Miranda standing idly and shut the door.

Miranda picked up a decorative paperweight, almost an oxymoron in this era, though the completely paperless office remained annoyingly mythological. Some people would always prefer
the tactile to the digital. “It must be some kind of crisis. She wouldn’t make me wait.”

Shepard looked at her sidelong. “Just how high in the Cerberus ranks are you?”

Miranda set it back down. “We don’t think about it like that. We’re not military.”

Before she could probe any further, the door opened again, admitting a harried man bearing her cup of coffee. He promptly slopped it on his shirt. As he was patting at the stain, he said, “Apologies. I’m Ms. Alonso’s assistant. She asked me to take care of you.

Shepard stared. Standing across from her was a man she once knew as Lieutenant Clare.

He glanced up at last.

“Shepard!” he said, startled out of caution.

She held her expression carefully puzzled. “Do we know each other?”

The hint was enough to get the man to recover himself. He cleared his throat. “No, you wouldn’t know me. I remember you from the vids. They gave you a hero’s funeral. How are you here?”

“It’s a very long story.” She accepted the remnants of the coffee. “When do you think Ms. Alonso will be available?”

“Shortly,” Clare promised. “She was summoned to the docks to retrieve a package.”

Miranda sat back and crossed her legs. “That must our data.”

While they waited, Shepard opened her omni-tool. Miranda raised an eyebrow. She rolled her eyes. “Just checking messages. Might as well do something with the time. They say the Alliance runs on red tape, but at least I could keep up with them. Cerberus gives bureaucracy a bad name.”

Her turn to roll her eyes, but she didn’t deny it. Angling the view out of her sight, Shepard sent a quick text to Joker. I need Miranda out of the room for at least two minutes. Can you help me?

The reply came quickly. Does a varren shit in the street? Stand by.

Soon thereafter, Joker coughed into their comm link. “Uh, Commander, we’ve got a problem here.”

She put her finger to her ear. “What is it?”

“Our docking privilege is being revoked. Something about corrupted transponder data.”

“They think we’re using a false identification?” She somehow managed to not sound as amused as she felt.

Miranda, who was following the call on her own comm, frowned. “I sorted our verification personally. This is unacceptable.”

Shepard sat back. “Go fix it.”

“I really should be in this meeting—”

“You’ll be back before it’s over. Besides, I’m the one who needs to talk to Alonso.”
She struggled a moment, then rose. “I’m going to have words with the docking authority.”

“Somewhere between ‘pissing themselves’ and ‘heart attack’ is appropriate.” Shepard folded her hands.

She almost smiled, before the door slid shut behind her.

Shepard wasted no time addressing Clare. “You need to get out of here.”

His eyes darted. Clare had been in logistics, down in Rio. Privy to spec ops missions but a non-combatant. They’d worked together routinely for years, and he’d always been nervy. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do.” She leaned forward. “Miranda is very smart, and loyal to a fault. Not to me. And she reads body language like a pro.”

“Ma’am—” he started, and fell silent, because that itself was a betrayal of his true purpose here. Part of her was pleased to know the navy hadn’t given up on this place, or on defeating Cerberus. But most of her was deeply irritated with their poor staff work.

“Who the hell sent you here?” she asked.

His expression grew angry. It was almost comical beside the coffee stain still wetting his shirt. “You marine types are so full of yourselves. None of you had the skills for this op. You couldn’t assemble a supply chain if your life depended on it.”

“This is way over your head. And if you’ve seen anything of Cerberus here, you know I’m right.” Her gaze pinned him to his chair. “Once Alonso arrives, get up, go directly to the dock, and do whatever’s necessary to get on a shuttle. Get back to Alliance space. You’re not high-ranking enough for Cerberus to bother following you out of the Terminus.”

Something in her tone got through to him, and cut through the indignation. Sweat beaded his forehead. He gave a curt nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now we’re done talking.” Shepard activated her omni-tool again, and began sorting her email for real, sipping at the coffee.

Miranda returned after another few minutes, looking both annoyed and satisfied. Shepard looked up. “I take it they saw reason?”

“They took the easy way.”

The door opened again. The woman who entered was as collected as Clare was not, her suit and jewelry impeccable. She extended a hand. “Ms. Lawson.”

“Good to see you again, Julie.” She shook.

Alonso turned to Shepard. “And Commander Shepard. A pleasure to have you here.”

Shepard likewise accepted the handshake. Alonso continued, “Forgive the delay. I was seeing to our other guests. I understand you need to speak to each other. We are, of course, happy to facilitate.”

“Where are they?” Shepard asked, impatient with the niceties, and already feeling like she needed a shower to wash off the combined Cerberus and corporate stink.
They followed the swishing of her skirt down the hall and into a much larger room, equipped with a laden sideboard for longer meetings, or special visitors. Everything in the room was exceptionally well-appointed, from the wooden table to the leather chairs and wool carpet. Luxuries not often seen this far from civilization.

Only two other people occupied the room. A man in a suit, carrying a large gray case, the indestructible kind often used for transporting weapons and arms. And a woman in jeans and leather, with smooth dark skin and her long hair woven into a mass of braids. An orange cybernetic scar lit the left side of her face.

“I’ll leave you alone. Please don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.” Alonso politely stepped out and closed the double doors, leaving them in quiet.

They sized each other up. Miranda put her hand on her hip. “I’m afraid you have the advantage.”

A fraction of a second, and then a smile rose on the woman’s face, more intentional than natural. “You would be Ms. Lawson.”

“And you are?” Shepard asked, unamused.

Her head turned. “And the famous Commander Shepard. Always nice to meet a fellow graduate of Osiris.”

“Excuse me?” Osiris was one of the programs mentioned on Kaidan’s datapad.

Her eyes widened with delight. There was a Cerberus insignia embossed on her jacket—black on black, hard to see until she turned slightly in the light. She stole a glance at Miranda. “Rumor says Ms. Lawson always did have a particularly uptight way of running her operations.”

Miranda would have none of it. “Answer the question.”

“Harker Dyson.” Another too-pat smile. “Armageddon Cell, if that means anything to you.”

Shepard ignored the theatrics. “You were at Ferris Fields?”

“Stationed nearby. To… monitor the situation. Not my usual gig, but I go where I’m told.” She went to the buffet and picked her way through a bowl of fruit. “The colony’s a ruin. They won’t recover from this. Even if they didn’t need the economic output from the estimated two hundred thousand missing, can you imagine continuing to live in a place like that? Classrooms half-empty, families with too many rooms in their habs and offices echoing?”

“You like poetry.” Shepard leaned against the wall and crossed her arms.

“Says the one-time philosopher.” She selected a strawberry. “Or am I misremembering your course of study?”

“The degree was for officer candidate school,” she replied, unperturbed. “My course of study was in the field, fighting a war.”

Miranda cut off that bickering contest before it could go any further. “We need everything you can recall from the attack.”

“Oh, I wasn’t on the ground for the attack. All our plants were taken with the other colonists. But
I’ll do you one better.” She nodded to her associate. “I brought gifts.”

The man laid the case on its side, and undid the locks. Shepard and Miranda peered inside. Miranda’s eyes widened. “That’s—”

“Part of the swarm,” Shepard said. Her hand brushed the carapace. There were three specimens, each a dull gold color, shaped like giant wasps.

“They’re biomechanical constructs,” Dyson said. “Fully engineered cyborg organisms. They completely paralyze an entire colony in one go.”

Miranda raised an eyebrow. “Nerve toxin?”

Dyson shook her head, her braids waggling. “No. Their sting creates a mass effect stasis field somehow. Nobody’s had a chance to look into it deeper.”

Shepard let out a sigh. “That’s why nobody’s fighting back.”

Miranda looked up. “How do they find their victims?”

Dyson shrugged. “You’ve got a science guy for all this, or so I hear. Or at least that was the argument for turning these over to your lab. But if I had to guess, they’ve got the same excellent sense of smell as standard wasps.”

Shepard had another thought, more cynical. “These aren’t the only specimens Cerberus collected.”

Her smug smile said she was right. “You can’t expect us to put all the eggs in your basket.”

“It’s enough,” Miranda said, straightening. “We’ll let you resume your mission, with our thanks.”

Dyson popped the strawberry in her mouth, stem and all, and jerked her head at the man. They filed out of the room.

“What a strange woman,” Miranda said, locking the case.

Shepard was more concerned with her. “What’s Osiris?”

“I don’t know much.” She brushed her hair off her face. “We recovered a data archive from the Alliance about nine or ten months into your treatment. The information it contained was far more detailed than anything in your previous medical records. It allowed us to surmount certain complications that had proven quite intractable, primarily adapting your body to the necessary cybernetics.”

“Look, all the code names kind of run together after a while, but I’d remember a program like that. I’ve never heard of Osiris.”

Miranda didn’t miss the trace of doubt. “It was run out of the intelligence ministry, not the navy. A lot of it amounted to scrap data—readouts from suit biomonitoring, training diagnostics, qualification metrics, that kind of thing. Not useful for routine care, but invaluable to Lazarus for baselining.”

“Qualification.” Shepard went still for a half-second, absorbing the realization, before the anger ignited like a nova in her gut. She took a deep breath to try to keep it down. Success was mixed. “This was Farrell’s fucking program? He was Cerberus all along?”

She blinked. “You remember Farrell?”
Her voice went low and hard. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t with our project more than seven months, just long enough to get your implants established. Then he was re-assigned.” She caught a glimpse of Shepard’s disbelieving face, and turned sardonic. “Pinky swear.”

Shepard took another breath. This had nothing to do with Miranda. But if Farrell worked on Lazarus, then it was no surprise they’d had zero respect for her person or privacy. She didn’t like the idea of his mind behind her plethora of implants. “What else did Cerberus do with the Osiris data? I know I wasn’t the only one monitored.”

“Farrell had other roles in the organization. Lazarus wasn’t his primary assignment.”

“He told us he wanted to improve combat mechs.” It seemed ludicrous now.

“No details, but from what I gleaned, he’d moved somewhat beyond that meager ambition. I wasn’t involved.”

“Speculate for me.” Shepard picked up the case. Farrell. Now all she needed was Saren to rise from the dead and the horror show would be complete.

“Lazarus supplied data to our other cells, and our labs are more of a shared resource. It’s possible Farrell expanded on our results. Though I doubt it involved deceased subjects. He was more intrigued by the potential for enhancing human capability, really push the limits of biosynthetic fusion. Make a virtue of what was necessary to save your life.”

“So his other programs could have used the same tech you put in me.” Dyson’s cybernetic scar lingered in her mind. A fellow graduate, she said. What had Farrell done with the tech after he left Lazarus?

“Yes.” Miranda frowned. “Does that bother you?”

“Mordin said something…” She trailed off, rubbed her forehead. “It doesn’t bother me, not like you mean. It concerns me. I’m not sure any of this was ready for mass production.”

“I can ask Cronos Station for more intel in my next report.” Miranda looked around. “Let’s get out of here.”

They left Delta Pavonis. As they exited, Shepard was pleased to overhear a rather cross Julie Alonso searching for her assistant. Maybe Clare had half a brain after all.

Back aboard the Normandy, Shepard handed the case to Miranda. “Give this to Mordin. We need a way to counter that stasis field as soon as possible.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the cargo hold.” She started walking. “I’m done being a collaborator to inhumane experiments. Knowing or otherwise.”

The krogan tank was exactly as she left it. His bio-monitors all blinked stable. He remained in full stasis.

She did one circuit of the tank, spent another minute looking up at him. “EDI.”

“Shepard.”
“Release the stasis field and get our krogan out of this tank.”

“Shepard, Cerberus protocols are clear. This is an unsafe environment. The nutrient bath can sustain him for over a year. This is adequate time to transfer the krogan to an appropriate facility.”

“I said get him out.” She folded her arms. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Very well. Initiating release sequence.”

After a moment, the fluid began to drain, down the pipes Normandy’s engineers connected when the tank came aboard. The glass facing swiveled away with a sucking sound as the seals came loose.

At first, the krogan didn’t move, for just long enough for Shepard to wonder if Okeer was wrong, and screwed up something essential.

Then he stumbled out and fell to his knees, fluid sluicing off his crest and shoulders, and coughed violently. Shepard stepped back to give him more space. More of the nutrient bath came up as spittle—his lungs fully immersed as well as his body. He rested on his palms, heaving.

After an even longer moment, he found his feet and rose to his full height. Those odd blue eyes blinked slowly, woozily. They focused on Shepard.

Then, without any warning whatsoever, the full-grown krogan full-on bull rushed Shepard and drove her into the wall. Pain blossomed in her shoulders.

His arm pressed into her upper chest. Not quite her neck, but it would be easy enough for him to slide it there. And he weighed several tons. Hard to move even with leverage, which she most assuredly did not have.

He sniffed at her, the nostrils of his large pink snout level with her face. “Human. Female.”

She could see every tooth in his broad mouth. But her hands were free. Sloppy, that, but she supposed he did just wake up.

His breath washed over her, hot and stinking of nutrient bath. “Before you die, I need a name.”

“Commander Nathaly Shepard.” Nothing but iron in her voice. She’d worked with krogan before. “You’re on my ship. Take a step back.”

“Not your name.” Impatient. But more than that—lost. Searching for something. “Mine.”

“Okeer didn’t give you a name?” From all his ranting about creating the one perfect krogan, that seemed a considerable oversight.

“Okeer’s words are hollow.” His mouth twitched. Discomfort. Dissatisfaction. “I am trained. I… know things. Ideas he tried to implant. Warlord, legacy, grunt…”

He trailed off, his eyes sliding away for a moment. Shepard’s hand slowly arrived at her hip.

“Grunt,” he repeated, rolling it around his tongue. “It has no meaning. It’ll do.”

“You wouldn’t prefer Legacy? Or Okeer?” The sarcasm was maybe a touch thick. Her fingers found her pistol’s grip.

“Those are big words for things I don’t feel. Maybe they fit your mouth better.” He shoved her a
bit, reminding her of her predicament. “I feel nothing for Okeer or his enemies. I will do what I was bred to do and fight. My blood demands it.”

“Okeer made you his tool.” She didn’t shy from his gaze, but kept her eyes fixed on his. “And you’re the second krogan I’ve had to remind that we’re more than what our blood demands.”

A hesitation. “There are krogan serving you?”

She’d managed to catch him off-guard. “In my last command. His name was Urdnot Wrex.”

“Okeer spoke of Wrex, in the tank. A wanderer. Forsaken by his own kind.” Grunt shook his head. “No strength. No more worthy of me than Okeer.”

Shepard would pay good money to hear him say that to Wrex’s face, but hell, this krogan was five minutes old. He’d learn. “Fighting is what Okeer wanted. What do you want?”

“The tank didn’t ask what I want.”

“I’m asking.” The pistol slid free of its holster and unfolded quietly in her hand. One spot of sanity—the new models had finally killed the telltale beep when it reached full operational configuration.

“One fight is as good as another. Until I find my own reason.” His mouth widened into something like a grin, with a total lack of mirth, but some joy in anticipation. “You’ll do.”

“You overestimate your luck.” Shepard lifted her chin. Not submission or defiance. Command. “I have a good ship and a strong crew. You’d make it stronger. Come fight for my clan and we’ll find the answers together.”

He wavered, just a little. “If you’re weak and choose weak enemies, I’ll have to kill you.”

That was Okeer talking, she was sure of it now, but was too smart to say so. “You can try.”

He laughed, and for a moment, he sounded almost like Wrex. Like there was a person under the stilted language and formal conditioning. She offered a small carrot. “Our enemies are as strong as they come. You’ll earn that legacy. Make it fit in your mouth.”

They stared each other down for several long seconds. Then Grunt straightened, relieving most of the pressure on her chest. “That’s… acceptable. I’ll fight for you. For now.”

“Good,” she said. “This could have gotten messy.”

Grunt glanced down, and saw the muzzle of her pistol nestled squarely against his side, directly over his liver. That got a better laugh, a belly laugh, something real. “Hah! Offer one hand and arm the other.”

She smiled back, just as sincerely. “Not that many people appreciate my style.”

He backed away and let her up. She rolled her shoulder. “You slammed me pretty hard.”

“You whining about it?”

“No. Just letting you know I owe you one.”

That earned her a snicker. Shepard felt faintly pleased with herself. The krogan brand of honesty was refreshing as ever. “We don’t have proper quarters appropriate to your size, but you’re free to
stay here.”

He looked around. “You got food on this ship?”

“For now,” she answered honestly, well aware of what a grown krogan could tuck away. “Come on. I’ll show you the mess.”
The Gamble

August 2185

Alenko watched the last of the pallet trucks carrying the GARDIAN defense system hardware lumber past, two hours overdue, and turned to the woman standing beside him. “Thanks for the help.”

“It’s my job as Alliance liaison for the colony,” she replied, stoically, pulling her jacket closer around her. The endless rain had plastered her brown hair to her scalp. They kept out of it best they could, standing in the small hab set down near the site, but venturing out was inevitable.

Alenko couldn’t let it go at that. These colonists had done nothing but invent one delay after another since his team landed on Horizon. When they needed to dig out trenches for the pylons, their previously-reserved backhoe was abruptly needed elsewhere for emergency maintenance. Somebody accidentally sent their cement to a secondary settlement three hundred kilometers north. That sort of thing. Somehow, Lilith got each new problem sorted out with barely more than a hiccup in their schedule.

“You could’ve done a lot less and still done your job,” he pointed out. “It can’t be easy given the way most people feel about us here.”

“I could say the same of you.” Lilith glanced at him sidelong. “We’ve had officers out here before who would have agreed with your sergeant’s actions.”

A few days after they arrived, Nguyen got into an altercation with a particularly recalcitrant colonial mechanic, Delan. Though Alenko agreed she was provoked, taking a swing at a colonist was unacceptable. Nguyen was now confined to quarters in off-duty hours. Sitting in a hotel wasn’t much of a punishment, but Horizon had no military force worth mentioning, only a civic police department and a reserve militia. Alenko had nowhere else to put her.

He’d sent his crew home early today as well. Until those pallets arrived, there was nothing to do but stir up trouble, they were losing the light, and the foul weather did nothing for their temper or morale.

Now, he simply shook his head. “Sometimes it’s hard to remember that being invited isn’t the same as being welcome.”

“Colonists out here are slow to trust. The Alliance has a way of asking a lot without giving much in return. Nobody wants to become beholden.”

Alenko tried to maintain patience. These were long, slow days, and he had yet to see even a hint of suspicious behavior to give the Alliance a clue about the abductions. More than once, he questioned whether Horizon was too close to the Traverse to present an opportune target. “So why accept the defense system?”

“These attacks have the whole Terminus nervous. The human parts of it, at least. Our governor felt we had no choice. We have to protect our citizens.”

“Seems like your governor didn’t win any favors with that decision.”

“No.” Lilith shrugged, eloquently. She had a frank and easy manner, as though her diplomatic inclinations were natural rather than assumed. “But the next election’s two years away. Long
enough to forget all this. And Ferris Fields persuaded a few naysayers to see her point of view.”

News of the attack came only a few days ago. They were all a little on edge. “This is a good note to end the day. We can start installing the control system tomorrow.”

One of the construction workers offered him a lift back to Discovery. He had an old-fashioned crawler truck, low to the ground on four wheels, jostling over the ruts worn into the muddy road. Horizon had cleared a patch of forest specifically for the GARDIAN system, far enough from the city to avoid the eyesore, close enough to protect the capital. They drove through a narrow column of fading, overcast daylight lined by thick trees of darkened green. Colonists claimed people had gotten lost five meters past the tree line. Just vanished into the twilight understory, unable to find their way back.

This time of year, late spring, clouds of insects rose from the forests in droves, some as large as housecats, streaming over the road as they rumbled onwards towards the capital. They only came into the city at night. His first evening on Horizon, Alenko, unawares, opened his hotel window to let in the cool air and got smacked in the face with a giant mosquito. Apparently, they fed on the nectar of similarly oversized flowers blooming in the forest canopy rather than blood, but that was small comfort. He still hadn’t gotten used to it.

The driver, whose name was Marlon, caught his stare and laughed. The swish of the truck’s wipers warded off the bugs, though occasionally one or two would alight on the roof with a clatter of legs. “It’s like something out of the Cretaceous, right? Wouldn’t be surprised to see a stegosaurus amble out of the woods.”

Like most children, Alenko had gone through his dinosaur phase, though perhaps with a bit more intensity. He wanted to object that stegosaurus had preceded the Cretaceous and certainly could not have lived in a forest this dense. But he’d also learned to refrain from correcting people unless it was important, or he really couldn’t help it. “Between the high O2 and the light gravity, this this place really felt like a tour world the first few days.”

Horizon wasn’t the most beautiful planet he’d visited. Oddly enough, that distinction went to Virmire with its sun-drenched tropical atolls. But it was paradisal in its own way, fresh and wild and secretive. As if somehow in an age where galactic exploration was routine, there were still adventures to be found amid its world-forests, shadowed marshes, and hidden lakes.

“And then the rain started, right?” The driver laughed and navigated a turn, the truck jouncing along and splashing mud. “The governor keeps talking about drumming up tourism, but with these attacks, folks are even less inclined to welcome visitors.”

“Yeah, we got that message loud and clear.”

“You intentions seem good.” He shrugged. “Your Alliance, who knows. I was first generation born on Demeter. The Alliance came in afterwards, and all they gave us was red tape for nothing in return.”

He had to bite his tongue. A comprehensive military defense, economic safety net, social welfare programs, and capital investment was hardly nothing. And Alenko rather thought if he could trust the Alliance after what happened to him at Brain Camp, Horizon’s citizens should be capable of not looking a gift horse in the mouth. But that topic was far more fraught than debating geologic eons.

“On the other hand,” the driver continued, nonchalant, “We all started to breathe a little easier once the Alliance polished off the geth. Border colonies got hit hard.”
“I heard. The navy packaged it with the other intel notices back then.” They’d gotten the reports on the wider war, every day. Nathaly made damn sure everyone saw them.

“You were in the war?”

“Yeah.” He wondered if he ought to say anything more. The man was clearly trying to make small talk, make the drive feel a little shorter. Or maybe just be friendly. But mentioning the Normandy always felt a little like bragging, and a lot like inviting questions he didn’t want to answer.

“They stick you in a lab somewhere?”

Alenko started, genuinely confused. “What?”

“You’re a tech guy, right? Bet there was a lot of R&D from tearing apart those flashlight heads.”

“No.” He cleared his throat and sat up a bit. “I’m a marine. They sent me here to coordinate the installation. I was posted to a ship during the war.”

“No shit?” He glanced at him, a little more relaxed than he had been a moment ago. “You look more like a book type who doesn’t skip out on gym day.”

Alenko wasn’t sure what to make of that. The guy worked construction. Maybe marines were more relatable than techs.

The driver rolled through another turn, kicking up some water pooled at the roadside. The wipers left muddy stripes over the windshield. “You see some action on that ship?”

People always asked that. He looked out the passenger window. “I was the marine detail commander aboard the SSV Normandy.”

The ship’s name remained recognizable even after all this time. The driver looked at him sidelong, longer this time. “Yeah?”

Everyone remembered what happened to the ship. Sometimes, it felt like the only thing people remembered. Alenko folded his arms and looked out the windshield.

After his silence made the answer clear, the driver let out a breath and shook his head. “Shit. You’re the guys who saved Terra Nova.”

He saw Kate Bowman’s face pressed against the port while he and Garrus tried to disarm Balak’s bomb, the way the light flashed through her hair as it went off. He hadn’t been able to extend his biotic shield through the wall to protect the hostages from the blast. Alenko shifted in his seat. “That’s the not the one people usually bring up.”

He made a tching sound. “It’s the one those of us in the colonies remember. Those uptight assholes on the Council had it coming. Tell everyone what to do and then can’t lift a finger while we’re bleeding.”

Before Alenko could reply, his omni-tool began to flash. He activated it and took a look.

“Those some new secret orders, Normandy?” the driver asked, plainly ribbing him.

He glanced at the header and closed the omni-tool before Marlon could get a look. “Just an email.”
He and Nicholas had exchanged a few since their date. Casual, no pressure. Alenko got deployed before they could have that pizza, and was a little surprised to be looking forward to it when he got back. Nicholas was… nice. Not exciting, but maybe not all of life had to be.

Not that it didn’t feel strange, mostly because for the first time in years he didn’t feel guilty. The question that plagued him for so long was finally at rest— he knew what had happened to Nathaly after he left her on the **Normandy**. For all its horror it was over. There was nothing he could have done that would have made any difference, not during the attack, and not with Cerberus later. She was gone. Maybe he’d finally started to accept that.

They entered Discovery city limits, leaving the forest behind. The driver dropped Alenko a few blocks from his hotel. As Alenko got out, he said, “Hey, Normandy.”

Alenko looked back at him. He raised his eyebrows. “Pick you up when daylight comes around?”

That was pretty much the only olive branch any of the colonists involved in the project had offered in days. “I’d appreciate it.”

He nodded, and headed deeper into the city. The rain seemed to be letting up, more of a fine drizzle than the downpour they’d endured all day, so rather than hail a cab, Alenko walked back to his hotel, enjoying the stroll and the sights despite his uniform drawing all the usual kinds of suspicious looks.

Horizon prided itself as an up-and-coming center for advanced technology, and its capital, though modest in population at over four hundred thousand residents, looked sleek, urbane, and thoroughly modern with nary a hint of a pre-fab. Out in the sticks, like the GARDIAN site, hab mods were still in extensive use. It still looked colonial. But in Discovery he could almost forget this place was wilderness a short seventeen years ago. This was a settled and fully functional city. Hard to imagine any force could clear it out without one hell of a fight. But Ferris Fields wasn’t much smaller, and even the survivors from the outlying areas couldn’t say what happened.

By local convention, the 38-hour days on Horizon were subdivided into five work periods. Those people lucky enough to be leaving with the sun crowded the streets, clustered in twos and threes, chatting and laughing and ducking into shops for dinner. For his own part, all Alenko wanted was a sandwich and some sleep. Construction required daylight. Even the navy preferred not to build sophisticated defense systems in the dark. But that meant he’d spent the last twenty-four hours at the site with just one brief catnap to sustain him.

That wasn’t an unusual schedule for a marine, but most of the time when he had to stay up all day, there was something generating a little adrenaline to sustain him. Not so with deliveries and building scaffolds.

So he was happy to find the hotel’s restaurant nearly empty when he came in off the street. Truth be told, it wasn’t very good, but it was convenient and within navy per diem, so it worked.

Or at least, he was until he spied North eating her own dinner, with a full plate wrapped in plastic film beside her.

Alenko slid into the opposite seat without asking. She started. “Sir.”

“Long day?” he asked, dryly.

Her brow wrinkled. “Not especially. I went out for a walk after you sent us back into town.”

“Must have been some walk, to need two meals.” He nodded at the extra plate.
She shifted in her seat. He sighed. “Private North.”

“She’s living off peanut butter sandwiches,” she protested, with more than a little accusation.

“If she runs out, we can requisition another jar.” He opened the menu.

North’s look of disbelief was almost comical. “But— you can’t—”

Alenko gave her an even look. “The Citadel’s a cushy posting, but I have a lot of latitude to discipline a marine in the field. Nguyen attacked a civilian. She’s getting off easy and she knows it.”

“He called her a—”

“I heard what he called her.” A little more patient. The scene with Delan had been ugly. “And I remember the very specific thing he invited her to do. Lilith sent him back to the warehouse, and he won’t be on site again. That was the most she was empowered to do.”

“Delan should be fired.”

“That’s for his supervisor to decide.” Given that the man shared Delan’s views, Alenko wasn’t optimistic.

“From the defense turrets,” she spat.

“Watch it.” Then he dropped the warning tone. “Look, it doesn’t sit right. But it’s our job to maintain control in the face of provocation. If I’ve got a marine hauling off over a few insults, how in the hell can I trust her to behave under fire?”

North sat back in a huff. “It’s not fair.”

“Life usually isn’t.” He glanced down the entrees. “I’m getting sick of the chicken. Maybe the pasta will be better.”

Another thirty seconds went by. Alenko counted down in his head, certain North wouldn’t be able to keep silent. Right on time, she straightened, going slightly formal in an effort to project assurance and rationality. “Commander Alenko, sir, it’s just she’s going to be cooped up there another fourteen hours, until the sun comes up. And I already paid for the food. It shouldn’t go to waste.”

Sometimes he thought he was too soft for this job. But hell, it wasn’t like Nguyen had been wrong. Undisciplined, maybe, but not unjustified. “Fine. But you pull this again, and I’m going to sit here and watch you eat two dinners, and lick the plates clean after.”

She couldn’t hide her flash of surprise—or elation. North shot to her feet so fast she nearly upset the table. “Thank you, sir.”

He watched her snag the plate and hurry off, debating. Then, when she was a few paces away, he said, “North?”

Giddiness turned to trepidation. “Sir?”

Alenko rubbed his forehead. But this problem had been growing since they landed on Horizon. Probably longer, but in harder to notice ways. “I’m not going to lecture you on fraternization. It’s not for me to judge. But someone else will, unless you get a lot more subtle about your crush.”
She sputtered. He turned back to the menu. “As you were, Private.”

“Yes, sir.” North scurried off like her ass was on fire. He shook his head, and ordered his food.

Dinner was leisurely; the hotel wasn’t busy this time of year, and only a handful of other guests sat down over the next hour. They asked if he wanted dessert and instead he treated himself to a nightcap, on his own dime per navy policy, and then asked for the check and took the second Sazerac up to his room.

The Alliance personnel had taken up the handful of weekly rate rooms on the premises, equipped with a small sitting area and tiny kitchenette, suitable for a long-term stay. But he still preferred sitting on the bed. His sole messy habit; eating in bed had been the bane of every romantic partner he’d ever had.

He put his feet up and read through his email backlog, including the one from Nicholas. Their messages became increasingly flirty as the weeks went on, the deployment, for once, working in his favor. Part of him was excited to get back and see what happened next. And another, bigger part was nervous and not sure if this was what he wanted. Harder still, because everything about Nathaly had been full-on yes, with very little in the way of doubt or second-guessing. That was a first. Maybe a last, too.

Alenko never believed in soulmates. He still didn’t believe there was only one person for anyone, that it was simply dumb luck amidst hundreds of billions of people in the galaxy, to encounter someone who made you happy. But he was starting to wonder it was possible to feel content with anything less, after finding a person like that. There wasn’t anything to do but try.

Polishing off the drink and wanting nothing more than to get to sleep, he undid the many straps and buckles of his utility uniform, left the heavy belt and combat boots lying by the bed, and padded into the bathroom to turn on the shower. He pulled the dirty shirt over his head and caught sight of himself in the mirror. His face tired, and his hair curling in this planet’s humidity, a perpetual annoyance no amount of product could overcome. His body marginally softer than in ‘83, because the Citadel post had its moments of satisfaction but was nowhere near as challenging or demanding as the Normandy, and PT wasn’t the same.

He looked older. That felt right; the last two years passed like ten, and it should show, somehow. Still hairless, though, aside from the modest trail peaking out from the waistband of his pants. Ironic given he had a taste for chest hair on other men. Here was hoping Nicholas was in the other camp, not that things like that were ever really a requirement rather than a preference.

Alenko shook his head at his own ridiculousness, and got back to getting ready to go to bed.

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Things looked better after a full night in a real bed and a little time to himself. Courtesy of his new friend’s truck, Alenko arrived back at the site early, which allowed him some time to plan. They were behind schedule and needed to recover ground. Ferris Fields had been hit, this unknown enemy’s biggest target yet and right around the corner from Horizon, and they could show up at any time. The whole colony was on high alert.

By the time his team showed up, they’d gotten the pallets off the trucks and laid into position, ready for assembly. Alenko was optimistic. The parts were massive, but designed for rapid deployment. If they worked fast, they might have it put together by local noon. There was some grumbling about the twelve hour stretch, though not as much as he expected. Alliance and colonists alike were eager to see this finished.
But just to be safe, he asked Lilith to have the colonial techs out at the site by 2200, to start loading up the software and getting it hooked into Horizon’s local defense grid.

The weather worsened throughout the morning. The colonists laid grass seed around the site, to hold down the dirt, but it hadn’t had time to get established and the cannon was surrounded by intractable mud. It was impossible for their equipment to get much purchase and the crews had to carry most of the components in by hand. The work slowed.

And then stopped altogether, just as they were ready to lift the tracking dish onto its pylon. Alenko rubbed his forehead. “What’s the problem now?”

Nguyen shook her head, disgusted. “Alliance didn’t send the cradle for the dish. There’s no way to mount it on the forklift.”

Lilith pursed her lips. “We’ll have to tie it down. Send someone up in the cherry-picker to sever the restraints and drop it into place.”

“No can do.” Marlon shook his head. “The only ways we can tie it down are the wrong orientation for the pylon. No way a crew dangling in the air can maneuver it.”

Alenko glanced at the time. The colonial delegation was due any minute now, and they couldn’t start syncing the system to Horizon’s defense network without that dish. “How much does it weigh?”

Marlon blinked. “A hundred kilos, give or take.”

“A hundred seven,” Lilith called out, having reached for a datapad containing the specs.

“Great.” Alenko nodded to Marlon. “Clear the site. Have a couple people ready to move in and bolt the thing down.”

“What?”

“Just do it.” Alenko walked over to the dish and began a cursory inspection, figuring out how it had to drop onto the pylon.

Nguyen, who had figured out what he intended, folded her arms. “It’s lighter here. Less gravity.”

“It’s actually mass that matters.” He crouched down, getting a look at it underneath, the dish laying on its side. “But since mass never caught on as a verb…”

He pulled off the last of the packaging. Lilith’s patience ran low. “Commander Alenko, if you might share your plan—”

Alenko took a breath, focused his attention, and reached out his hand. A few of the onlookers made sounds of surprise, but all of his concentration was on the dish, limned in blue light and slowly rising towards the pylon. The weight wasn’t bad, nowhere near his max capacity. But in combat he only had to fling things around. This involved endurance and precision.

He moved it slowly, trying to block out the way his nerves had started to tingle, the equivalent of muscle fatigue. And with all the care of dropping an egg into a basket, he set it on the pylon. Held his breath as he released the field, ready to slam it back into place, to catch it if it fell. But it stayed, perfectly aligned and balanced.

Marlon’s team rushed in to secure it. Alenko dropped his hand and wiped his forearm over his
Lilith looked from him to the dish and back again. She closed her open mouth. “That works.”

Just as the construction workers were tightening the last of the bolts at the start of another long afternoon of rain, several aircars marked with Horizon’s colonial insignia emerged from the road, their wakes scattering water from the puddles, and settled out of the way.

He got Nguyen’s attention. “Keep things running here. I need to talk to our guests.”

“Sir,” she acknowledged, but perhaps the slightest shade less sullen than yesterday. In fact, she’d been mostly silent since the incident with Delan, unusual for her. He got the sense that she’d embarrassed herself. Though that hadn’t kept her resenting him at the same time.

Alenko left Nguyen to oversee the work, and went with Lilith to greet them.

A half-dozen people stepped out of the cars, bright umbrellas blossoming in their hands. They busied themselves unloading their gear. Two hauled out climbing harnesses to safely access the antenna, while the rest gathered various pieces of electronic test equipment, carefully shielding it from the rain. They were still unpacking more crates when Lilith arrived.

She nodded to them. “I’ll have my people unload your gear. While they’re at it, we can do some introductions and get you familiarized with the GARDIAN system.”

Then she turned to Alenko. “This is Lieutenant Commander Kaidan Alenko, heading up the Alliance team.”

“Staff Commander,” he corrected, unoffended. He’d given up on umbrellas days ago. “I’d prefer to do this with the full team, so we don’t have to repeat ourselves.”

“My apologies.” She gestured towards the site. “Shall we?”

They tromped over to the antenna structure, the colonial techs chattering excitedly to each other. One of the visitors hung back. He was young, scruffy in a loud button-up shirt and dark beard several days past needing attention. A state-of-the-art holo visor covered his eyes, but he wasn’t carrying any equipment. Not even a datapad. It looked lazy by comparison.

He caught Alenko’s suspicious stare and offered him big-tooth smile, the kind that usually seemed smarmy and fake, but in this case merely appeared his natural disposition. He stuck out his hand. “Jim Messner, procurement specialist and wandering merchant.”

Alenko shook, and found the man’s palm somehow sweaty despite the downpour. He wiped it discreetly on his pants. “Wandering merchant?”

“I sell all over the Terminus. Every colony out here needs some kind of edge.”

Edge had a particular connotation. “And the mercenaries?”

He spread his hands. “Everyone buys. And I need reliable transport for my goods, and as the Terminus goes, the Suns are the best. You navy types think of them as mercs, but really, they’re a logistics corp.”

“Uh huh.” Alenko started to catch up with the rest of the group, but then paused. “How do you get invited to this? What’s your interest here?”
“I sold Horizon half their existing military-grade hardware. You think they didn’t want me to check out yours?”

Alenko let that rest and moved on. Everyone in the navy knew leaving advanced technology like this in the Terminus was a calculated risk, and it wasn’t his job to second-guess the strategic math. Or so he told himself a few times as he caught up to the group.

Lilith was just introducing the two teams, navy techs to colonists. “The Alliance sent us a number of engineers from—”

One of Alenko’s techs interrupted her. “Samantha?”

He was blinking at a young woman. She looked to be of Indian descent, with a chin-length cap of shining black hair under her yellow umbrella, and her distinct British accent seemed to confirm it. “Specialist Ravid. They finally let you out of the lab on Arcturus?”

“For now,” he said, darkly. “What on god’s green earth are you doing here?”

“Visiting family.” She looked to her right, at an older man with a strong resemblance. “Somebody thought coming out in the rain to watch a construction project would make for a rousing afternoon.”

He was totally unphased. “Technology is your life’s work. Surely you can spare a few hours to assist your own colony.”

“It’s Meridian,” she protested, naming the six-hour midday period. “Nobody works during Meridian. I could be watching movies with mum and Thea as we speak.”

“You know each other?” Alenko interrupted.

The young woman, Samantha, straightened. Not quite going to attention, but as if she was well on her way there before checking the impulse. Specialist Ravid answered. “Sir, this is Specialist Traynor. We were at Oxford together. Brilliant with comm systems.”

Her skin was too dark to show a blush, but Alenko would’ve sworn she was blushing all the same. He glanced at the man. “And this is…?

“My father,” she said. “Dr. Lewis Traynor.”

Lewis Traynor extended his hand. “I manage the comm buoy network here on Horizon. Such as it is.”

Alenko returned the handshake. “Maybe you can explain the comm outages we’ve been having. Nobody at the consulate seems to know anything.”

Lewis frowned, more exhausted than upset by the question, and twisted the umbrella’s handle in his hand. “I wish I knew something. I’ve never seen anything like it. Diagnostics show the equipment’s in perfect condition.”

“Someone’s jamming you?” He tried not to get excited. This would be the first evidence of any kind of foul play. All of the missing colonies experienced communication blackouts prior to their abductions.

“The system isn’t susceptible to that kind of tactic.” Lewis shook his head, unconvinced. “But even so, the outage areas make no sense. Why jam a residential neighborhood? Or a shopping
complex? No, I suspect it’s something subtle in the software. Some kind of interface bug between networks.”

Lilith cleared her throat, a touch forcefully. “If we could return to the topic at hand, I was just explaining that linking the Alliance system with Horizon may be complicated.”

“Navy protocols are very different from the privately-engineered packages Horizon opted to purchase at founding,” Lewis agreed.

Alenko had not worked as an engineer in over ten years, but never quite forgot his education as one. It was what landed him with the bomb on Virmire and what drew into this discussion now. “The two systems can’t talk to each other without a huge mess of scripts.”

“Unfortunately not.”

The colonists looked unsurprised, while the navy techs muttered. This wasn’t in the plan.

“Well,” he said, taking in both teams, making it clear to his people that this was their orders. “Let’s get started, then.”

They worked through the afternoon and into the evening. The challenge was interesting enough that Alenko didn’t even mind the lack of sleep as the sun began to set. He might not have deep experience with comm systems, but he knew digital hardware and programming.

At first, the system didn’t even want to turn on, which was a scary moment, until one of his techs remembered the commands for initialization. And then they had to watch the dish swivel at random for two hours until they could convince it Horizon’s routine communications and space traffic were no threat. Alenko began to understand why the cannon was kept offline until the electronics were up and running.

Despite the early doubts and the foul weather, he was impressed by how quickly the two teams merged, and proud of how well North fit in. Science was a universal language. Somewhat less impressive was Messner’s continual probing as the day wore on.

Messner hung over the techs’ shoulders, colonial and Alliance alike, and his inquiries were far too detailed to be coincidental. He’d studied this system before Alenko’s team arrived. And at greater depth than extranet schematics generally offered. Messner either had the kind of connections that made the Alliance nervous, or he considered hands-on experience with the system valuable enough to merit an investment with people who did.

But the most irritating factor was the blatant acceptance of his intrusion. Messner had a brand of awkward charisma common to young men with natural gifts for humor and assholery. He joked and baited the techs in turn, so that social reluctance to say no to the friendly, funny guy, and a vague fear of taking the brunt of the next joke, combined to get Messner more access. Alenko had to pull one of his techs aside and remind her in the strongest terms that the system design was classified.

Meanwhile, the colonists openly invited Messner to practice the controls as they worked, essentially training him on the technology, and from his exchanges with Lewis Traynor this was a regular occurrence. They weren’t quite old friends, but had definitely worked together before. Possibly Messner was the senior Traynor’s primary sales contact.

He caught Nguyen watching Messner as well. Shadowing him, almost, though she mainly kept quiet and let the techs do their work. And while Traynor endured her father’s showmanship with
good grace, she wasn’t comfortable. This rubbed her wrong. She was far more circumspect in her
technical explanations than his own people.

But the final straw came when Nguyen drew him aside. “We’ve got a problem.”

He glanced back at the team, and lowered his voice. “What kind of problem?”

North hovered at her elbow. “You know how they can’t get the systems talking? I found this.”

She put a datapad in his hands. Nguyen crossed her arms. “And Messner wandered off to take a
piss thirty minutes ago, and hasn’t come back.”

Messner’s reedy voice had been absent for some time. He flipped through the charts. “This isn’t
our code.”

The navy maintained strict commenting guidelines for all its software. The chunks North
highlighted were barren, their function difficult to read at a glance. North nodded. “Someone’s
corrupted our files, and made this a lot harder than it needs to be. From the way the techs are
swearing, I’m guessing it was going to be hard enough already.”

He wiped the rain off the screen, reading, with growing disbelief. “There’s no way anyone does
this with a dozen people watching them.”

Nguyen shrugged. “Dunno. I’m not a tech. But the site’s not exactly high-security, especially at
night.”

“He handed the datapad back. “We’ll need to pull the log files. And hope they’re
unaltered.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Me neither.” On the bright side, evidence of interference was good. On the other, it wasn’t
particularly useful without a culprit. The residents of Horizon made it plain that they had plenty of
motives of their own to sabotage the Alliance.

Nguyen coughed. “You really ought to thank North. Five techs and a host of civilians, and nobody
cought this. They still think it’s a comm error.”

Alenko glanced at North. The kid was practically glowing. He raised his eyebrows, but only said,
“And for the moment, we want them thinking that. Let me copy this to my datapad.”

And that was when his patience for this misadventure to the colonies ran out. Because when he
reached for his datapad, he found it missing.

“No one seen my datapad?” he asked, for the look of it, though he had a sinking suspicion of
exactly where it was.

“That’s crap scattered all over this site,” Ravid said. “You can use mine.”

He put his hand down on the empty top of the control system’s cooling unit, frowned, and spent a
few moments searching the vicinity with increasing dismay. “It was just here.”

Alenko’s frown deepened, but he kept his tone mild. “I’ll hunt it down.”

The two datapads were nowhere in the mess of instruments and notes scattered across the
equipment. Nor were they sitting on the freshly-cured concrete deck, lost somewhere under the
tarps amid boots and jackets and safety gear. Alenko checked the cot room in the hab with no result except from waking a cranky construction worker. That left the old crates, still half full of packing materials and odd ends they couldn’t fit into the final assembly, the crane and backhoe, and the fifteen-odd vehicles that carried them all out here.

He started with the construction equipment, because it was fast, and to no surprise found nothing. The crates would take hours. So he sloshed over to the informal parking lot, just a field of mud with a few pioneering ferns poking up from the remnants of the forest.

The long windows at the back of Marlon’s truck were popped for ventilation. They hadn’t been this morning. Alenko threw open the shallow door built into the back, and peered into the humid confines.

Messner flashed him a big fake grin from the nest he’d made in one corner. “Commander, sir.”

That followed by a facetious salute. He’d opened up the button-up, exposing a slightly damp undershirt. The air wasn’t much above 20 C. Not warm enough to sweat, even in the truck, and god knew Messner hadn’t done any of the heavy lifting to get the defense system installed.

“Taking a breather?” Alenko asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

“I’m just a tourist, yeah?” Messner shrugged, and gestured at the GARDIAN system out the window, a hundred meters back, its dish still seeking a signal, though with a bit more purpose than before. “Impressive shit, though. A real triumph of Alliance engineering.”

Alenko didn’t play along. “What are you doing here?”

“Or should I say Ariake Tech engineering,” Messner went on, as though he hadn’t spoken. “It’s not like the Alliance builds any of its own fancy gear. It’s all subcontractors. Private industry.” Another flashy smile. “The purview of salesmen. If I wanted to waive the right to rest my feet, I’d be in construction. Or the navy.”

“Glad to see you could find accommodations for your nap that are up to your standards.” Alenko leaned into the truck. “You were all over the techs for hours. Hard to see how this is more interesting.”

“Got bored.”

“I don’t think so.” He jerked his chin at him. “What are you looking at?”

His grin widened, with a touch of laughter. “Alenko, man, you really gotta loosen up.”

“What,” Alenko repeated, “Are you looking at?”

When Messner made no reply, he dove forward and snatched at a blanket by his feet. Messner tried to scramble back, but wasn’t quite fast or subtle enough to hide the datapads underneath.

Alenko reached in and grabbed the nearest, despite Messner’s attempts to push his hands away. Not his, but obviously tampered with, because it opened immediately, bypassing the lock screen and taking him directly to detailed schematics of the GARDIAN control system motherboard. And the UI belonged to the same proprietary operating system used to widespread groaning throughout the Alliance navy.

“You stole our datapads,” he said. Disbelief warred with disgust.
“After you silenced your techs—”

“There is no reason a system operator needs to know this kind of information.” His eyes grew hard. “And there’s no reason you need to know anything at all.”

Messner’s voice rose. “Like it or not, Commander Alenko, you are not in Alliance space right now. This is the Terminus. Nobody here gives a wet fart about your intellectual property or national security.”

“Donating these systems to protect vulnerable colonies doesn’t entitle them to replicate the technology.” He had an icy calm, long Horizon days of frustration coming to a crux. “If Horizon decides to scrap it for intel after we’re gone, that’s their prerogative, but I doubt it’s what their governor wants.”

Alenko gathered up the datapads. When Messner tried to grab them back, Alenko started tossing them like frisbees out into the muck, angry as he’d ever been. Better to have them ruined than in his hands.

A handful of people were jogging across the dirt, drawn by the argument, Lilith among them. She arrived panting and stared aghast at the datapads strewn through the torn grass shoots. “What’s the trouble?”

“No trouble—” Messner began, still crammed into the truck.

“I want him gone,” Alenko said, flatly. He crawled back out, the last of the datapads in his hands. Messner scrambled after.

Lewis Traynor shook his head. “I need him here. He worked with me to meet the specs for all the comm equipment used by Horizon’s government. Linking into sat comms is critical to the early warning function.”

“Yeah, I can tell he’s doing you a world of help slinking off to steal files off our datapads.” Alenko couldn’t stop himself for all the world. “He leaves now. You can do whatever the hell you need with sat comms once my team is off-world.”

Lewis started to respond, but his daughter suddenly pointed at Alenko’s hands. “That’s my datapad!”

Messner soured. “I was only trying to understand some of the finer points—”

“There are four here.” Samantha grew more indignant, collecting them from the mud. “No, five.”

Lewis folded his arms. “This does look fairly damning, Jim.”

Lilith attempted reconciliation. “Can we focus on sorting out the guidance system? It’s still going crazy.”

Alenko’s eyes didn’t leave Messner. “He goes back to town, or we do. Right now.”

“Commander, I’m sure you understand Horizon isn’t subject to military orders.”

“I understand I won’t enable a thief and a spy.”

“A spy?” Messner scoffed. “I’m a businessman.”

“Nobody knows who is behind the attacks on human colonies. And you’ve said yourself that you
work for everyone.” Not willing, for the moment, to reveal the sabotage they’d uncovered. He still had no proof it was him.

His words hung in the air. Everyone looked uncomfortable, except for Alenko, whose calm carried a glacier’s worth of ice, and Messner, whose face showed open amusement but his eyes bore hints of rage.

Lilith reached for delicacy. “You’re not suggesting…”

Messner cut in. “That a salesman is secretly orchestrating mass abductions throughout the Terminus?”

A titter of laughter ran through the group, swiftly killed. Alenko glanced from Messner to Lilith and back again. “No. But even if we assume your motives are nothing more than opportunistic greed, all that means is you don’t know who is responsible. And most of your associates are on the short list. The same people you’d give an inside track to Horizon’s security with this data.”

Messner laughed again, though this time, nobody joined in. He looked around. “Come on.”

Lewis Traynor cleared his throat. “Jim, it might be for the best if we speak after the installation is complete.”

Alenko handed Samantha back her datapad and began helping her collect the others. She clutched it in a death grip, looking daggers at Messner.

Messner made one last feeble attempt. “This is a big misunderstanding. You’re blowing it way out of proportion. All I wanted was to understand the systems a little better.”

“We’ll talk later,” Lewis repeated, a touch more firmly.

Messner sulked a moment, then let off a stream of curses and stormed back to the car. A minute later, it lifted into the air and peeled out of the site with enough speed to tear leaves from the bushes clustered at the tree line.

“Happy?” Lilith asked, into the silence. Behind the single word was the weeks or months of fallout that just landed on her plate.

“Would you be?” Then he bit his own tongue, and attempted diplomacy. “I’m satisfied that we all managed to see the gravity of the situation before too much damage was done.”

A few grimaces. But they returned to work without further discussion, rain drumming down all around them.

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liked that about her, the ability to be comfortable in silence. Only an idiot would call her shy, but she was naturally quiet to an almost unnatural degree.

The hatch opened, a block of light the color of construction lamps shed across the floor. Horizon had no major satellites worth mentioning; just a few pieces of coal-black space junk only visible if you knew exactly where to look.

He was expecting Marlon, saying it was time to leave, but instead Samantha Traynor stepped into the room. Alenko set down the datapad with a touch of surprise.

She frowned, started to speak, and then caught sight of Nguyen. “What is that?”

Nguyen eyed her, speaking as she would to a child. “It’s my arm.”

Traynor strayed a step closer. “No, I mean, what is it?”

She raised her eyebrows. An are-you-stupid look. “My arm?”

“It looks like an Inigua Mark V. I’ve never seen one in real life.” Traynor was absolutely captivated. “It’s got the most advanced cybernetic gating protocols and nerve interfaces on the market. I tried to license it, when I was working with the geth, but the lab couldn’t afford it.”

“A family friend works R&D for Inigua.” Nguyen relaxed. “I’ve had one since the old Carris models. They loved me. Kids are great for studies like that, because cell replication is still in overdrive.”

“How old were you when…” She trailed off delicately.

But Nguyen was hard to insult. “Eighteen months.”

“Eighteen months!”

“Like I said, it’s my arm.” Nguyen straightened, dusting off her hands, the knife edge dividing seamlessly back into fingers. “Want a look?”

“Could I?”

Nguyen rolled her sleeve up nearly to the shoulder. Then she depressed something on the limb; there was a hiss of air, and then the entire arm went a dull silver-gray, losing the flesh tone she typically kept while on duty. Then, casual as anything, she gave it a twist and the whole thing came loose from a conical metal connector.

She held it out to Traynor, who took it in both hands with every evidence of delight. “It’s barely three kilos.”

Nguyen folded her remaining arm over her stomach, smiling her satisfaction. “It’s matched to the weight of an organic limb for someone of my build.”

Traynor continued to admire the prosthetic, rotating it and flexing the joints. Alenko, who had watched the whole exchange with some amusement, cleared his throat. “Sergeant.”

“Right.” She sighed. “Back to work.”

She took the arm back, reattached it, and gathered stack of boxes before heading outside to the compactor. Traynor approached him. He set aside his report. “Specialist Traynor.”
“It’s Samantha, please.” She sat down across from him. “I’m on holiday.”

Technically speaking, that didn’t relieve her of the formalities of service, but Alenko wasn’t quite that uptight. “What can I do for you?”

She folded her hands, and then unfolded them and laid them flat. “With Messner, earlier…”

“What about it?”

“I don’t think you understand how we do things here. Would you have ever treated an Alliance subcontractor that way?”

He gave her a frank look. “Alliance subcontractors who steal data they’re not authorized to have are fined and prosecuted. All I did was banish him until we’re done.”

Samantha remained stuck on the point. “My father has him over for dinner whenever he visits the colony, like most of the reps he works with. I’ve known him since I was fifteen. I can’t believe he’d do anything nefarious.”

But she didn’t sound completely convinced.

“I hope you’re right. But is being polite worth that risk?” He returned to his datapad. “In another week, the GARDIAN system will be up and running, and we’ll be out of your hair. And then your father can show Messner anything he wants—it’s out of my hands. But while it’s being installed, better safe than sorry.”

Her look grew a shade more pointed. “How exactly was Horizon selected as a beneficiary of this technology?”

“The Alliance reached out to a number of human colonies along the Traverse border. Horizon was one of several who accepted our help.” He couldn’t help a small smile. “You can’t tell me you’re in the navy and suspicious of our motives?”

“I’m not. But you’re not an engineer. Engineers don’t invite confrontations. They collaborate.”

“I never claimed I was.”

“But you’re here.” She eyed him, speculatively. “And I know the Alliance doesn’t give away expensive hardware for nothing.”

He thought about how much to say. Anderson’s orders were clear, but it seemed like she was on the cusp of guessing most of it, if she hadn’t already. “Border security is always a problem in a sector the size of the Traverse. Everything we can do to help our neighbors help themselves is good for the Alliance.”

“And you’re not worried what we’ll tell Messner, or anyone else, about the system after it’s operational. I’ve worked with GARDIAN technology, in my lab back in the UK. I know how sensitive some of the components can be.”

“It’s a calculated risk.” The same thing he’d been telling himself since he got the assignment. “I was sent to oversee the installation and prevent any adverse interference. Currently, Horizon’s only defense is a groundsie militia. This is a huge upgrade. It’s bound to attract attention.”

“Adverse interference.” The light went on. “You’re baiting the enemy.”
“Only for a little while. Once the system is operational, it’s a deterrent. Lots of softer targets in
the Terminus.”

Her frown deepened. “And you’re… comfortable with that?”

“I’m glad one more human colony will have a fighting chance.” He met her gaze. “And I’m glad
to be here, making sure we get to operational.”

He expected disgust, but instead she absorbed that for a moment, and spoke with a cautious
curiosity. “You’re not frightened?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You know what’s happening out here, and you came home.”

“And I’m terrified.” She licked her lips. “But I needed to be with my family, and my family’s
here. Though I suppose you get to go home once the work’s done.”

She didn’t say it like she meant it to be cutting. More like a simple statement of fact. His home
wasn’t at risk. “You’re R&D, right? Part of a navy lab?”

“Back on Earth.” Her brow furrowed.

“So you must have handled geth technology during the war.” All military research had been
sidelined for six months by that particular need, until Sovereign was defeated and their colonies
secured.

“What of it?”

“I’ve seen a colonist blow his hand off by failing to observe proper procedure removing a geth
core.” That particular incident happened on Feros. “You handled dangerous tech on a regular
basis. Did it scare you?”

“Of course not. Respecting the damage technology can do doesn’t mean we should be afraid of
it.” She folded her arms. “Your colonist shouldn’t have been messing around with geth without
training.”

“And it’s your job to have the right training.”

“Quite.” Then her expression changed, as she saw his point.

“This is my job,” he said, matter-of-factly. “They give us training, too. Pretty good training.”

“Not for a colonial invasion.”

“No.” He chuckled. “But I’m not expecting it will come to that. There’s no way anyone can stage
abductions on this scale without any kind of build-up, to soften the ground. Not with any known
tech or force. That’s what I’m looking for.”

She tilted her head. “It seems a low-probability exercise.”

He shrugged. “I’m a marine who’s been ordered to sit on my hands since these abductions started,
just like every other Alliance marine. I was happy to be asked. It’s better to be doing something
than watching everything fall apart, just because it’s on the wrong side of an imaginary line.”

Samantha nodded, and stood. He expected that was the end of it, but then she paused at the hatch.
“Would it help to have Messner’s bills of sale to Horizon?”
“Maybe.” He blinked. “I’m not sure if he’s just a nosy ass or if it’s anything more.”

“You’ll have them,” she said. “Good luck, Commander.”

“Thank you, Specialist.”

Samantha nodded a second time and stepped out into the night, pausing only to say goodbye to Nguyen. He watched the hatch almost a full minute, thinking back over the unexpected conversation, before deciding there was nothing further to be done. He turned back to his report.

It was a standard document, outlining their progress on the system without including specific detail on the problems they’d encountered. The schedule might be intercepted but that would be the worst of it. Mentioning the sabotage was inadvisable in a transmission. Per Anderson’s orders, that should wait for debrief.

He debated mentioning Messner. Even just dropping the name might be enough to raise some interest. But it was hard to deny he was frustrated with the scarcity of new intel, and pointing to Messner could just fill the need to find something. He had no concrete evidence whatsoever. Just a gut feeling that his interest was more than overbearing and bizarre.

Nathaly seldom questioned her gut, and it was usually right. But that wasn’t Alenko’s way. He finished off the report with just the expected updates, and sent it along to Anderson as it was.
August 2185

A swarm wasp smacked against the glass, mere centimeters from Shepard’s nose. She looked from the glovebox to Mordin Solus. “Are you sure re-activating them was a good idea?”

“Of course.” He frowned as he grasped one of the wasps with the gloves, gently separating it from the others. “Need to observe natural behavior to create effective countermeasure. Too weak to break glass. Had to replace gloves with thicker polymer. Tricky to manipulate specimens.”

“Just how strong are those stingers?”

“Can penetrate spacesuit webbing. Ceramic plates of hardsuits more problematic. Seem to ignore shields, like knives or other close combat.”

That was no comfort at all. Hardsuit webbing was exposed at all joints, and in a narrow strip along the abdomen to allow the wearer to bend. Plenty of room for a wasp. And on garden worlds, their heads were not usually covered at all. The helmet limited vision and the personal recirc units were never as good as breathable atmosphere.

Aloud, she said, “So strengthening our defenses won’t work.”

“No. Have different method. If you can’t block, why not disappear?”

Mordin smiled. Shepard blinked, but realized any explanation would be well out of her nonexistent technical depth. “Keep at it. My gut says we’re going to need it sooner rather than later.”

“Attacks escalating,” Mordin agreed. “Eventually, have to face Collectors. Bad idea not to visit Ferris Fields.”

A muscle twitched in her jaw. “I know.”

They were several days out from Sanctum. Though Mordin assured her the specimen wasps were helping his research tremendously, she regretted with each passing hour not collecting them from Ferris Fields herself.

But what bothered her even more is when she tried to think of why she capitulated so readily to the Illusive Man’s plan, she came up empty. It was so early it still qualified as night, even by her standards; she was tired, and surprised, and concerned for Crewman Hadley and dismayed by the thought that an Alliance garrison might attack her on sight by association with Cerberus. But commanding the first Normandy wasn’t any less complicated, and it never hindered her decisions. Well, not often, anyway.

Mordin glanced at her sidelong. “Never met Illusive Man. Know him only by reputation. Said to be, hmm… persuasive.”

Shepard didn’t consider herself easy to manipulate. But she had a temper. Udina exploited it more than once, and he was hardly the first. Maybe the Illusive Man hadn’t known her before, but he sure did now, and nobody could have custom-tailored a better situation to provoke her than the one that had become her daily life.
It was a double-edged sword. Sometimes anger could sharpen her determination, focus her will. Other times it led her into blind traps. Maybe this time it had done both, misdirecting her attention to personal concerns. That was what Anderson was getting at. Though a part of her did wonder how in the hell she was supposed to react to all this. The best soldiers in the galaxy weren’t automatons, or otherwise wars would only be fought with mechs.

She stepped back from the glovebox. “Next time we’ll go. I want that countermeasure ready.”

But the thought grew in her mind as she walked back to the CIC. She stepped up to the galaxy map and began entering commands. This time of day, the CIC was bustling. Kelly offered her a smile from her usual post beside the map.

Jacob was at a nearby terminal. He looked up, brow furrowed. “New assignment?”

“We’re going to Ferris Fields.” Shepard shook her head. “I don’t know what in the hell I was thinking not going.”

He raised his eyebrows. “There’s nothing left to learn there.”

Shepard started to shrug, but realized she had far too much of equivocation lately. Time to trust herself. “I think there is.”

Jacob eyed her a moment longer, and then shrugged. “Fair enough.” He queried the computer. “We should have enough fuel, though we’ll be on frozen provisions, unless we can swing by Omega or another major port—”

The comm officer, Jenny Goldstein, interrupted. “Commander, you have a priority call from the Illusive Man on the QEC.”

Shepard didn’t look up from her work. “Miranda can take it.”

Jacob was startled. “He’s calling for you.”

“He’s her boss, not mine.” If the Illusive Man was manipulating her with that much subtlety, the best thing she could do was distance herself. “I’m sure if it’s important, she’ll let me know.”

Goldstein relayed the order. She looked at Shepard. “She’s on her way.”

“Good.” Shepard finished entering their new destination. “Kelly, I need you to go down to the lower cargo hold and inventory the rest of our supplies. I want an accurate count before we leave.”

Kelly didn’t respond. Shepard looked up, the question on her face.

Kelly swallowed and laced her hands behind her back. “I’m sure the computer system is accurate, ma’am.”

In Shepard’s experience, the computer was only as accurate as the crew’s logging, even with VI supervision. EDI interrupted. “I have fully monitored our stores throughout our mission and corrected the logs as necessary. I can survey them again now if you wish.”

“That’s fine.” Shepard studied her yeoman. “Why don’t you want to go down to the hold?”

She looked away. Forest, a few terminals down, tossed her hair. “That crazy bitch is down there. I wouldn’t want to go, either.”

It didn’t stretch her imagination to guess who might be the crazy bitch. And now Shepard had a
The *Normandy*'s lower hold was a low-ceilinged, red-lit space crammed in between engineering and the shuttle bay. It provided below-deck access to the drive core as well as auxiliary space for supplies. Since the port and starboard holds were proper rooms, full height with good illumination, the crew preferred to store smaller items down here, to maximize livable space aboard ship.

Of course, not everyone had the same definition of livable.

Numerous pipes carrying everything from core coolant to oxygen crowded the small space, creating the illusion of partitions where there were none. Shepard had to duck low as she came down the stairs. Most of the crates had been moved to the back. In their place stood a field cot with the parts of a disassembled shotgun littering the sheets.

Shepard picked up the ammo block and turned it over in her hands.

Jack emerged from behind a wall of pipes, seemingly unconcerned. “Hey.”

Her presence took up the whole room. It sent tingles up and down Shepard’s nerves, a sensation like sight or touch from a sense she’d never known she possessed, showing her a kind of cloud swirling around Jack. Resistant but not impermeable at the edges. Almost blinding in its intensity. Shepard was disconcerted.

Noticing her slack-jawed, Jack’s face took on a feral expression. “You come down here to gawk?”

With a burst of intuitive effort, uncomfortable in its own unfamiliarity, she managed to shunt most of the strange impression aside. Shepard looked around. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”

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“Sarcasm. Nice.” Jack sat down on a wide pipe, an improvised bench, drew her pistol, and began checking it over. More like an unconscious habit, as if this was simply what she did when her hands were idle.

Shepard set the ammo block aside and folded her arms. “We can get you some real quarters, you know.”

Jack’s face was a shadowed profile in the red light. “This is dark, quiet, and hard to find. That spells safety to me.”

“Cold, too.” It was definitely a few degrees below ship standard, and Jack’s clothing mostly consisted of tattoos. “You getting food down here?”

Her lips curved, mocking. “You worried about rats?”

“You’re not a stowaway. You’re a valuable member of my crew.”

Jack’s expression soured. “I’m not looking for a friend, ok. I need your databases, and you need people killed. So just stop.”

She tried a different tact. “Find anything yet?”

“Not sure it matters to you if I do.” Her tone was careless, but the way she sat on that pipe, looking over her weapon, was anything but. “I’m looking for names. Dates. Places.”

“You don’t even know what they did to you, do you.”

Jack stood up so fast that she was nose-to-nose before Shepard could blink, her furious painted face
pushing up into hers, eyes hard and glinting. “I know exactly what they did to me.”

The best way to answer volatility was with stone. Shepard was unmoved. “But not who, or when, or where.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I will.”

Jack stepped away, and then turned and walked towards the pipes. Almost to herself she said, “And then anyone who’s fucked with me will pay. Everyone they loved will pay. I’ll empty the whole fucking galaxy.”

She said it so flatly that Shepard was slightly unnerved, despite her best efforts. But she stood by what she said to Miranda—this wasn’t anger. It was fear. It was the reaction of a child who earnestly and honestly believed the only way to be safe was to kill anyone who so much as looked at her wrong. Shepard had been that child, once, briefly, but she suspected life had been kinder to her than to Jack.

And someone who was tired. Tired of watching her back, tired of waiting for the next torment. Shepard looked at her and wondered what the hell even Cerberus could do to a person to make her like this.

It made her hate them that much more. Jack was strong and fierce, and should be a leader of whatever she chose to do with her life, full of confidence, not hiding in a cargo hold rifling through achingly dull records for a little hope of peace.

Then Jack spun back around and leapt lightly onto the cot, landing in a crouch and scattering the shotgun components. Her mouth twisted into a smile that was almost euphoric. “You could really do something with this ship if you cut Cerberus loose.”

That was almost funny. “Like what?”

“Go pirate. Live like royalty. I could help.”

“You’d be my first mate?”

Her smile widened. “I’d handle the executions.”

Jack’s jewelry glinted in the dim light, a strangely heavy gold piece wrapped around her right ear, near the faint circular scar of her biotic implant. Kaidan’s amp had been near his ear, too, though his was a small flat plate flush to his scalp. She wondered if the piece served two purposes. When she smiled like that, it was all too easy to remember how she’d laid out three heavy mechs using nothing but her biotics.

Evenly, Shepard said, “I’ve killed plenty of people, but I’ve never liked it.”

“Never?” she asked sweetly.


“It’s not love. It’s survival. Every time someone dies, my odds of living go up.” She shrugged. “Might as well love what you do. I wouldn’t have expected you to be squeamish.”

“It’s not squeamishness. It’s self-restraint.” Shepard gave her a nod. “I’ll get these crates moved out of here.”
“They don’t bother me.”

“Yeah, but you bother the rest of my crew, and I need them to do their jobs.”

Jack didn’t quite laugh at that, but she was definitely amused. Any reply was interrupted by footsteps on the stairs. Miranda came into the hold. “There you are.”

She spotted Jack and frowned. Jack gave her very best creepy grin. Miranda sighed, the kind of deep existential sigh that comes from profound exasperation, and turned back to Shepard. “We need to talk. The Illusive Man has a mission for us.”

“We’re busy,” Shepard said shortly.

“You might want to hear the details first.”

“So spit them out.”

Miranda gave Jack a significant look. Shepard rubbed her eyes. “Miranda.”

Her face hardened. “There’s a situation on Lorek. Eclipse mercenaries are holding a Cerberus operative.”

“I take it this isn’t a hostage situation.” It was a kind of black joke; Shepard had been held herself. She’d rather be a hostage.

Evidently Miranda had similar experiences. She grimaced faintly. “No. His transmitter went offline twelve hours ago. It took some time to trace it.”

In those circumstances, even an hour was a long time. “And you think he’s alive.”

She nodded. “I do. He… he was highly ranked, in one of our other cells. And we recently dealt Eclipse an enormous blow aboard Omega. They’ll want what he knows. And also just to…”

Shepard let out a sigh of her own. “Just to hurt him. Because we hurt them.”

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “His name is Tyrone Rawlings. He was in deep cover, tracking Eclipse shipments throughout the galaxy, amongst other things. His data has proven invaluable to the Cerberus mission.”

Jack, who had been listening all this time, spoke up. “Heavily guarded, I hope?”

Shepard didn’t hide her cynicism. “You want to help Cerberus?”

“I went from one hellhole ship to another. I want to stretch my legs.” She stopped fiddling with the pistol and holstered it at last. “Besides, how often do I get a chance to pick the brain of a Cerberus operative?”

“You won’t be interrogating him,” Miranda said, firmly.

Jack shrugged. “Sounds like Eclipse is taking care of that for me.”

Much as she hated to admit it, Shepard was craving a fight herself. And Cerberus or not, she didn’t have the constitution to leave someone in that position, not when she could help. Ferris Fields wouldn’t get much colder in the interim. “I’ll need whatever you have on the Eclipse facility.”

Miranda relaxed, just a hair, just enough to tell Shepard she was genuinely concerned for
Rawlings’ fate. Maybe they knew each other, or maybe she wasn’t quite the ice queen Wilson imagined. “I’ve got the dossier up in the CIC.”

Shepard gave Jack another nod, and she and Miranda went to the elevator. Shepard bounced once on the balls of her feet. “Did the Illusive Man tell you to say all that?”

She actually laughed. “Hardly.”

“He gave you an earful?”

“He doesn’t shout, but he has other ways of making his displeasure known.” She shook her head. “The long and short of it was he felt that while he is graciously offering you the use of his ship, you can spare a few days to do him this simple favor.”

Not so subtle, then. She was probably over-analyzing her association with the Illusive Man. Jack wasn’t wrong about everything; just being on this ship seemed to induce a certain paranoia.

They set a course for Lorek, and spent the rest of the day planning their assault.

The shuttle rattled as it brushed Lorek’s atmosphere. Though they were coming in hot over the daylight pole, its sun was a red dwarf, and even in this perpetual high noon it was only half as bright as the sunniest day on Earth. Shepard glanced at Miranda. “You’re sure we won’t attract any unwelcome guests?”

“The batarian capital’s hundreds of klicks north of here. If they didn’t care that Eclipse established a base, they won’t care about us either.”

It was a reasonable argument, but in Shepard’s experience, the Hegemony never allowed reason to get in the way of territorial behavior. Being exiled from the galactic Council, and being denied the Traverse, they were the only significant race expanding into the Terminus with an official government blessing. But that was a problem for later.

Her squad filled the small shuttle, sitting or standing as space allowed. She addressed them all. “There are two main entrances, so we’ll split into two fire teams. I’ll go in first with Garrus, Grunt, and Jack. The rest of you go in the back with Miranda. We need to find Rawlings as quickly as possible and get out before Eclipse can muster an organized response.”

Cerberus estimated the facility was staffed by some thirty or forty Eclipse mercenaries. Shepard had faced worse odds, but that didn’t mean she liked them. She looked forward, through the open door into the shuttle cockpit. “Oyama, once we’re on the ground, pull out and prep for extraction. I doubt we’ll be coming out the same place we went in.”

“Understood, ma’am.” Oyama lacked Joker’s flair, but she was a solid pilot, and followed orders quite reliably.

She moved on to the next check. “EDI, I’ve got you on comms?”

“Yes, Shepard.” EDI was placid as always. “I will track both teams simultaneously and relay pertinent command information.”

“Can you monitor Eclipse transmissions?”

“Eclipse routinely encrypts their comm channels, but I will attempt to decipher it.”
“Thanks.” Shepard looked at her team. “Any questions?”

Kasumi looked out of the depths of her hood. “And if we find anything interesting that isn’t Rawlings?”

Shepard rolled her eyes, but these were mercenaries, and she didn’t care that much. “Just don’t let it slow you down.”

Kasumi smiled and sat back. Shepard raised her eyebrows at the rest. “Anything else?”

A round of shaking heads and murmurs of no. “Good. How long?”

“Five minutes,” said Oyama.

Plasma engulfed the shuttle ports. They streaked across the roiling sky.

Oyama settled on the grass a hundred meters back from the main entrance. The hatch swung open on a dirt plain, the air desperately thin and hot. Shepard all but bounced out of the shuttle in the low gravity.

The facility seemed lightly guarded, as it had from orbit. But Shepard hadn’t forgotten Eclipse’s over-reliance on mechs. Sure enough, as she scanned the gate, she spotted two automated artillery cannons.

Oyama lifted off behind them, on her way to drop Miranda’s team. They were on their own.

“Garrus,” Shepard said. “I need those guns offline.”

He raised his sniper rifle and peered down the scope. His face had mostly healed, though his right mandible remained bandaged, and the scarring was extraordinary. “I can hit the power boxes, but it’ll probably set off an alarm.”

There was no cover whatsoever between them and that gate. Shepard looked at him. “Do it.”

He raised his gun and fired. The power box below the left gun went out in a puff of smoke and fire. The other gun swiveled towards them, but just as quickly, Garrus fired again, disabling it before it could target them.

“Good,” Shepard said into the silence that came after. “Let’s move.”

They began their short trek, under the shadow of endless clouds, transporting this tidally locked planet’s water from daylight to darkness, as they had for billions of years. It would never rain here. Instead a high, dry wind scoured their skin and scorched their lungs, the grass dusty and tired under their boots. There was a stench of baked earth.

Grunt chuckled quietly to himself as they walked, excited by the coming battle. Jack wasn’t the only one eager to leave the ship. As for Jack herself, she stalked ahead like she owned every inch of the ground on which she stood. Garrus shot Shepard a glance. “Nice team.”

“It’s fine. We’re not here to make peace, anyway.”

“Might sound strange after the beating we took on Omega, but I’m fine with raining down all the pain we can on these guys.”

“Are they the ones?” she asked.
“The ones who what?”

“The group that approached your guy.” She figured one of the three merc groups had to get the ball rolling.

“I don’t know.” His expression darkened. “I never saw Sidonis again. Just suddenly, my men were getting ambushed and dying.”

“He’s probably dead too, you know.”

“He had to cut some kind of deal.”

She snorted. “Because these kinds of mercs keep their word. Would you want that loose end?”

“He’s alive. I can feel it.” Garrus was practically growling.

Shepard decided to drop it. They crossed the shuttle pad and arrived at the gate. From deep within, an alarm blared, just as predicted.

Grunt felt along its broad front, his massive hands still dwarfed by the size of the hatch. “How we getting in?”

“Like this,” Shepard said, and knelt down to remove several explosive charges from a utility pouch.

His eyes widened. “Nice.”

Jack likewise approved. “Go in with a bang.”

Garrus blinked. “We’re the distraction?”

“I didn’t feel like being quiet today.” Shepard began to set them along the edges of the hatch. “That’s why I sent the quick-and-silent-types with Miranda.”

“Zaeed?” he asked.

“He’ll do his job, and they needed firepower.” And truth be told, she didn’t really care for him, personally, and didn’t want the constant low-grade irritation, not right now. She finished setting the charges. “Clear.”

They backed away. Shepard hit the ignition on her omni-tool.

The charges exploded into acrid smoke and a shower of sparks as they chewed through the metal gate. A great sheet fell away the rest, easily enough to enter. And as the smoke cleared, Shepard saw a half dozen laser sights staring out at them. Raise the alarm, indeed.

Shepard smiled and raised her gun. “Let’s roll.”

The Eclipse got off one shot before Jack surged forward with a savage yell, sweeping her arm in front of her. The wave of biotic energy tossed them into the air, sailing backwards into the building. Shepard felt the attack run through her body like electricity, but the implant tuning did its job, and her head stayed clear. She opened fire and dropped three mercs while they were still aloft.

Jack waded into the melee. Grunt let off a shotgun blast, downing one man, and charged ahead with a war cry of his own. As a groaning mercs began to rise, Grunt kicked him back down and fired at point-blank range.
Grunt stomped on his chest for good measure. The target of his first assault stumbled to his feet, slurring out a curse, and raised his rifle.

“Grunt!” Garrus fired. This round when through the merc’s helmet. The corpse held perfectly still for a long moment, and then toppled over.

Grunt turned, saw it, and laughed.

The last of the mercs, tossed up against a crate, was just shaking off her wooziness when Jack scowled and threw a ball of raw biotic power. The asari slumped and did not rise.

Shepard moved into the building. This was a staging area for supplies, and a storage space for vehicles. Massive crates of cheap aluminum crowded the garage. Plenty of cover, but that worked against them now. The alarm kept on wailing. Her brow furrowed. “Where are their mechs?”

Eclipse was infamous for its extensive use of robotic soldiers. Shepard was rather surprised to have been greeted by flesh and blood.

“They’ve got salarians here, too,” Garrus said, prodding one of Shepard’s targets with his boot. “That means all kinds of tech crap waiting for us.”

Shepard continued forward, her team following behind her. Nothing stirred. They had to know the welcoming squad was dead. But nobody was coming.

She spied a short staircase leading to a hatch at the back of the garage, deeper into the facility, and started towards it, winding through the crates. Maybe they figured a hallway or whatever was beyond that door might present a better bottleneck. Or maybe Miranda’s team made too big a splash and they’d all run to the back entrance, the attempt at distraction completely defeated.

Halfway to the staircase, a whirring sound caused Shepard to pause in her step.

Grunt sniffed the air, a supremely krogan reaction to the unknown. Sometimes she’d hardly guess he was tank bred far away from the sands of Tuchanka. “What’s that?”

Another whir joined it, and then another. She couldn’t tell where it came from. They were alone.

Garrus turned in place. He had a new bit of kit since their mission against Saren, a custom visor, complete with a holographic sight and information panel that hovered over one eye. Shepard hated that kind of thing herself. She found it distracting, and its barrage of unnatural data—LADAR, sonar, biometric, parts of the spectrum not meant for humankind—made her question her instincts.

But it had its uses. Garrus’ eyes widened. “They’re in the crates.”

He retreated a step, his back to Shepard’s. “The mechs are in the damn crates.”

“Shit.” She raised her rifle. “We make for the stairs. Put a wall to our backs.”

Jack sneered. “For some mechs? Fuck that.”

And with that she unleashed a torrent of biotic energy and flipped the two nearest crates.

Shepard watched, both dismayed and slightly impressed, as they fell into other crates, creating a cascade of tumbling aluminum blocks that would have seriously upset any organic occupants. But as it was, the whirring rose to an angry buzz, the sound of dozens of mechs activating at once.

All around them, the doors of the crates began to open. The team huddled together in the center,
completely exposed. Jack held another ball of blue light in her hand. Grunt pumped his shotgun.

Garrus likewise raised his weapon, sighting on the nearest. “Well, you said you didn’t want quiet.”

A LOKI mech with a tin can head stepped into the light. Shepard fired. It dropped like a stone. “How many can each of these boxes hold?”

“Twenty, maybe more?” Garrus shot another as it emerged. “They’re testing us.”

“Yeah.” Machine learning was a bitch.

Jack apparently didn’t have patience for that, either. She raised her voice. “You want us, you silicon assholes? Come and get us!”

She hurled her ball into one of the crates and immediately followed it with a shockwave. The sides of the crate bent outwards in the explosion, mech parts rattling like popcorn against the metal.

There was a moment of silence, and then mechs poured from the crates in torrents.

The air filled with debris—bullets pinging off walls, crates, the ceiling, other mechs. The crazy shrapnel soup slowly eroded their shields and made it hard to aim at anything.

Shepard just managed to hold her group back, shooting them as soon as she caught a glimpse, but that was just one crate. She could hear other mechs advancing, a slow, inevitable march. They couldn’t run, but this was almost worse. A bullet pinged off her shields.

Garrus was just as pressed. He yelled at Jack. “I don’t think mechs have assholes.”

Jack sent three mechs flying over their heads. “Why? You been up one to check?”

Shepard ran out of mechs just as her thermal clip overheated. Garrus wasn’t so lucky. “Cover me!”

“Grunt! On your six!” Shepard seized a clip from her pouch.

Grunt turned and charged into Garrus’ crate with a fierce yell. Sounds of shotgun blasts, rending metal, and deep krogan laughter followed.

Shepard jammed the new clip in as fast as she could and stepped into Grunt’s place, now trying to cover multiple streams of mechs coming from the crates further back. The occasional hit from a mech’s pistol became a steady patter. They were low-caliber weapons, cheap, almost disposable, but her shields wouldn’t hold forever.

There were just too many of them. She had to even the odds.

“Funnel them to the stairs!” She waved their squad back, advancing towards the small area she cleared. “Jack, drop a box in their path!”

“Which path?” she yelled back, heavy with sarcasm. The mechs continued to stream from nearly every direction.

Shepard made a quick calculation to get the mechs to chase them, rather than circle around. She jabbed her finger. “There! In front of us!”

Jack gestured towards one of the crates, and raised her arms over her head as blue light limned its panels. It rose into the air, spun gently, and fell into place with a deafening clang. The electronic
whirring of confused mechs rose up behind it.

Shepard didn’t pause to admire it. “This way. Stay close.”

They snaked through the small gap she created. Jack’s impulsive handiwork left a maze of tumbled crates, but they hampered the mechs even more, confusing their targeting algorithms and navigation protocols. It only got worse as Jack continued to funnel their path with strategically relocated crates. To anyone who had fought mechs it was abundantly clear these new shipments had yet to be linked to a controlling VI. Small favors.

On the other hand, if Jack had simply left well enough alone, they might not have activated en masse. Unlinked mechs tended to only respond to direct threats.

Shepard continued to plow a path, while Garrus and Jack dealt with the mechs behind them, funneling them into a narrow stream with biotics and firepower. It was grueling work. They barely kept up.

She landed a direct shot to a mech’s tin can head and saw the stairs waiting beyond. “Almost there!”

They hurried up to the platform, which gave them an excellent view of the garage. That was when Shepard realized two things. First, she had grossly underestimated the quantity of mechs assaulting them.

Second, Grunt was not with them.

Garrus had the same thought. “Where’s the krogan?”

The garage was in chaos. Mechs crawled over and around crates, continuing their inexorable march towards her squad. Doors rattled as mechs trapped in their containers tried to struggle free.

And in one far corner—

“There.” Shepard spun Garrus bodily.

His mandible flared. “Are those FENRIS mechs?”

Grunt was a whirling blur, a one-ton wrecking ball. He kicked the nearest robo-dog into the wall and fired on a second. The mech dodged easily, running in circles around him like a wolf nipping his heels. A third crested a crate, actually sat back on its haunches and raised its flat glass face to the ceiling with a howl of white noise, and leapt onto his back.

He let out a growl of his own and tore it loose. By then the first had recovered. It launched itself at his knees.

Jack had noticed their attention. She snorted without breaking stride in her biotic attacks. “Big guy knows how to fight.”

“Okeer called him a perfect specimen.” It occurred to Shepard just then that Grunt was the krogan version of Miranda, designed to be the epitome of his species, to serve his father’s agenda. Though she doubted either of them would appreciate the comparison.

A bullet took down her shields and forced her into a crouch behind the platform bannister’s thin cover. She returned fire and disabled the mech, but another took its place almost immediately. “We have to get him out of there. We can’t outlast this.”
“There’s nowhere to go.” Garrus shot two mechs in quick succession. A thin sheen of sweat covered his face, soaking the edges of his bandage. “They’ll just follow us into the facility.”

She shouldn’t have put him in the field so soon, no matter his protests. But it was a little late for regrets.

Jack’s pistol clicked. She knelt down, popped the heat sink, and slammed in a fresh one. “Running a little low on thermal clips.”

This was a garage. There had to be something she could use to end this quickly. Her eyes searched the room, and landed in the left corner. “Get Grunt up here and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Garrus raised his rifle, attempting to clear a path for Grunt, but couldn’t find a clear shot. “They’re moving too fast.”

Shepard opened up her lungs and bellowed across the room, with every ounce of command she’d ever possessed. “Grunt!”

His head jerked towards her, a pure reflexive response to that voice. She gestured. “Get your ass over here!”

But in that instant of distraction, the three FENRIS mechs collected themselves, and leapt as one. Grunt went down in a cloud of dust, the machines ripping at him savagely with their clawed feet. Flashes of electric blue burst deep with the debris, accompanied by the mosquito-zapper whine Shepard recognized as a taser. Grunt roared.

Garrus started down the stairs. “We have to go get him.”

“Wait.” Shepard spoke before she truly knew why, her subconscious recognizing something in the chaos and sending it directly to her mouth. A half-second later, a mech emerged, fleeing at top speed— or as close to top speed as it could get with a euphoric krogan hanging off its rear end. The other two limped after them, nipping at his boot heels.

Shepard, Garrus, and Jack all raised their guns. The two stragglers went down hard.

She couldn’t get a clear shot at the third, which continued to drag Grunt, twisting and turning as it tried to buck him off. Grunt doubled down and dragged himself further onto its back.

“They’re gaining on us!” Garrus drew her attention back to the other mechs, which had advanced uncomfortably close to their position.

“Hell with it,” she said. Grunt’s shields would be back by now. She aimed and fired.

Her shot blew out the shoulder joint in the robo-dog’s foreleg. The mech collapsed. Grunt rolled off it. Then punched it full on in the face, as it tried to jump up on his chest. Glass cracked. It stumbled back and went still.

Grunt lay on his back, shaking with laughter.

He was also just in recovery range. Shepard shot her squad a glance. “Cover me.”

She slipped down the stairs and ran to his position.

“Shepard!” he roared when he saw her, his face stretched in an ecstatic grin. Blood streaked his forehead, where the mechs’ claws tore the skin just below his crest.
She hauled at his arm, more to get the point across than any real expectation of being able to haul a person Grunt’s size to his feet. “This place is overrun. We need to leave.”

“And leave an enemy at our backs?” Beyond all reason, his mouth stretched wider, large square teeth bright in his mouth. “Just let me at them!”

“I’m not planning to leave them.” She raised her eyes and gave the powered-down mech a significant look. And then further, to what it lay against.

Grunt might be high on battle-lust, but he wasn’t stupid. He cackled, a sound Shepard never expected to hear from a krogan, and as strange, a deep gleeful rumble from high in his chest, and let her haul him back to the stairs.

As they cleared the top, she snapped at Jack, “Shield us.”

“From what—”

Shepard set her aim. Jack’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, fuck.”

The shield bloomed just as Shepard fired. Against such an easy target, she couldn’t miss, and FENRIS mechs were designed for close combat. Their last line of offense when damaged past repair was to explode.

And this FENRIS mech had come to rest alongside a tank full of shuttle fuel.

It was a good tank; Shepard knew bullets wouldn’t penetrate it, and even a grenade was a gamble. But the detonating mech tore through it like candle wax. Then the whole room went white.

Her ears rang. Someone shook her, once, then more forcefully. Her vision began to clear. Garrus.

He shook his head. “Well, you certainly made your entrance.”

Shepard looked past him, and her mouth dropped open.

The force of the blast crumpled the crates and mechs together in a long metal jumble up against the far wall. Above the tank, the roof had collapsed, and all around the pile of concrete the floor was blackened. She was shocked to still be on her feet.

All the four of them could do was stare, for one moment united in awe of the explosion.

Then Jack let out a ragged breath and reached for the water bottle clipped to her belt loop. She drained it in one pull and crumpled it in her hand. “Get fucked, Shepard.”

But there was just a trace of smugness in her as well.

“Nice work,” Shepard said, suspecting any further praise would only sour Jack. She tried the hatch behind them and found it unlocked. “We’re behind schedule. Move out.”

Every last inch of them was coated in dust and ash. Garrus had just popped his heat sink when the tank exploded, and now was digging through the chamber, trying to dislodge the debris.

Shepard slipped into the dark corridor beyond, armed and ready, but apparently Eclipse put faith in their mechs and didn’t send a welcome party. She took the opportunity to do a quick inventory. Thermal clips were lower than she liked. Blood caked half of Grunt’s face, an enthusiastic if not particularly serious wound. Jack had to be exhausted and Garrus was clearly overextending himself.
As if reading her mind, Garrus cleared his throat. “That’s not the stupidest thing I’ve seen you do, but it’s up there.”

She grinned, a little careless after their close call. But it felt good to see those mechs go down. “Guess I’m losing my touch.”

He shook his head. Her comm lit up. Miranda. “Shepard, what’s your status?”

She watched Garrus bang his rifle against the wall in an attempt to unjam it. “Well… we’re inside the facility.”

Grunt chuckled again. It infested Jack, who let out a single, half-strangled laugh, but could not suppress her fierce and sly grin at still being alive. That in turn broke Garrus, who leaned against the wall, all grating laughter and shaking shoulders.

Shepard turned away, because she was on the comm, and didn’t want to transmit the joyful semi-hysteria that had overtaken her squad.

“We heard an explosion,” Miranda said.

Her best attempts in vain, Shepard glanced out the hatch over the ruins of the garage and her composure evaporated. She doubled over, clutching her stomach, unable to stop her own laughter. That set her squad off again.

Miranda was lost. “Shepard? I can’t quite make out what you’re saying.”

She had to sit down. Somehow, she forced out a reply. “It’s done. You don’t need to worry about it.”

A slight pause. “I expected more mechs, but so far we’ve only seen Eclipse, mostly salarians.”

Grunt was almost crying. Garrus rubbed his shoulder, trying to calm him down. Jack stared at them both, her mouth quirking, shoulders quivering. Shepard avoided meeting her eyes and replied over the comm. “You don’t need to worry about them either. We… took care of it.”

“All right.” Miranda sounded doubtful, but let it go. “So far no sign of Rawlings.”

“Keep me posted. Shepard out.” She dropped her finger from her ear, cutting the comm, and sagged against the wall. After a little effort her self-possession returned. “Ok. We still have a mission to finish.”

“Seriously?” Jack said. “Let’s just torch the place and be gone.”

Shepard raised her eyebrows. “Aren’t you even a little curious what he knows that’s got Eclipse so interested, and Cerberus so worried?”

Jack’s only reply was an inelegant snort and an open sneer—a victory, in Shepard’s estimation. She hauled herself to her feet and reached out her hand to Garrus. “Come on. We need to go.”

He let her pull him upright. They both turned to Grunt.

He continued to laugh intermittently. Half his face was caked in blood. It spilled down over that white armor from Okeer, a vivid and compelling badge. Shepard let out a sigh and pushed his head back against the wall to get a better look at the wound. “You need stitches.”
Grunt shoved her away, but not with any real effort. He could have put her through a wall if he wanted. Even for a krogan, he was strong. “Just a scratch.”

“It’ll keep until we’re aboard ship.” But then she would ensure he spent some time with Dr. Chakwas. “On your feet. We have a few fights left here yet.”

“Did you see those dogs?” Grunt rose, still smirking ear-to-ear, pulling his massive shotgun up alongside him. He pumped it idly, one-handed. “Almost like real varren. Hehe.”

Shepard was quite sure he’d never seen a real varren. Okeer put together one hell of a program for imprinting false memories.

The squad started down the corridor. Shepard took point, with Garrus walking drag. They were well defended. But this part of the complex seemed almost abandoned; even the lights were erratic at best. Shepard was oddly and unfortunately reminded of Feros, wandering the long-neglected Prothean corridors the colonists could not afford to illuminate, or even water-proof. It was the constant scent and sound of dripping water. Eclipse must be down on its luck. Or maybe her little explosion nicked a few neglected pipes.

Grunt kicked at the air as they walked, as he’d kicked one of the FENRIS mechs. “Bang! Dented the wall.”

Garrus had a tone drier than chalk. “A great victory.”

Shepard grinned. “Too bad they don’t explode on contact with concrete.”

Grunt let out a guffaw. “Too bad.”

They came to a hatch. Shepard tagged it open and her rifle swept the empty room. “Clear.”

Grunt peered over her shoulder. He took in the chair, the terminal, the cart sitting off to one side with all its drawers neatly shut. A little of the mirth left him, dissolved into foreboding. “What’re these mercs doing around here?”

“I don’t know.” That was not, strictly speaking, the entire truth. Shepard could not identify the various pieces of technology. But she damn well knew an interrogation room when it stared her in the face, whether the benign accommodations of C-Sec or a totally black merc cell in the Terminus.

But she couldn’t say why Eclipse had such extensive need for interrogation—an entire facility—nor explain the heavy salarian presence. All of the signage across the building was in a salarian script. Even STG got queasy about the kinds of things they were doing here; salarians preferred a more sophisticated approach.

“Mercs call them centers for intelligence,” Jack stated flatly. She’d been brooding since they moved into the facility proper, leveling a glare at every hatch they opened. “They all have them. This is where Eclipse enemies come to die.”

“Had a few run-ins?” Garrus asked, dryly.

She offered one of her spooky smiles. “ Blow up, steal, and kill enough shits in the Terminus, they get to know you.”

Shepard had nothing to say to that. Instead she continued up the hall.
They encountered more hatches, guarding similar rooms, but no sign of any mercs. No sign of Rawlings, either. Her apprehension grew with every step. This was not a standard defense protocol.

Garrus scratched at his bandage, a new habit, one Chakwas had done her level best to suppress. “This is an ugly place.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You have any idea what Eclipse is up to off Omega?”

He shook his head once, no. “They weren’t much interested in getting a slice Omega itself, not like the Suns or Blood Pack. Maintaining a presence there was mostly about smuggling goods across the Terminus. It’s a major transit hub.”

But there was something more ominous in his tone. “Nothing more to it?”

“There were rumors.” He was quiet a moment. “About their recruitment tactics. Brutal doesn’t seem to cover it.”

Such as?” Shepard crowded up to a corner and peered around the edge, to see nothing but more empty hallway.

“Let’s just say the local murder rate spiked whenever they were hiring.”

This corridor was as abandoned as the first. Surely the explosion would have drawn Eclipse in droves, but they’d been walking unmolested for ten minutes now. Shepard licked her lips. “Something’s wrong.”

A single flickering light lit the path ahead. A noxious smell rose from the water puddled on the floor. Shepard took a cautious step forward, then another, rifle raised.

Why was the power still out? Where was Eclipse? They just destroyed their garage, so they had no means to flee.

She raised her hand to her ear. “Miranda, status report.”

“Eclipse has fallen back.” Her breath was harsh, labored. “They’re trying to draw us out.”

Shepard started walking faster. “EDI, put Bravo squad’s position on my omni-tool.”

“Done.” EDI was perfectly calm. “You should reach their location in approximately eleven minutes.”

She increased her pace. Her squad had to run to catch up. As they came to an intersection, she turned left, only for Jack to yank her elbow. “No. This way.”

She jerked her head in the opposite direction and started walking. Shepard disagreed. “That takes us away from the others.”

“We can circle through their old server rooms and be there in half the time, and with probably less resistance.”

“How—”

“I’ve been here before,” she said, shortly, each syllable spat out like rotten food. “Didn’t recognize it until we got past the garage.”
Garrus might have left C-Sec behind, but he still had the suspicious instincts of a detective. “Yeah, I guess you just forgot the name of the planet, too.”

“Been to a lot of planets.” It was clear she couldn’t care less if Garrus believed her.

For her part, Shepard wasn’t sure she believed Jack either, but she was offering to help, and the Cerberus data she wanted was back on the ship so it was probably sincere. “Lead the way.”

Grunt wrinkled his nose as they splashed through the stagnant puddles. “Why does everything smell so bad?”

“It’s bad water.” Shepard had spent her life aboard stations and in small, miserable colonies. “Collected in cisterns, before being treated for consumption. On Lorek I imagine it’s the reclaimer leaking.”

Lorek’s tidally locked day side was a desert, all of the water evaporating and migrating to the ice fields of the far side. Nobody who lived here could afford to waste a drop.

Grunt went quiet a moment, unusual for him. “Is this what the water smells like on Tuchanka?”

The krogan homeworld was also mostly desert, at least these days. Shepard formed her answer carefully. “All of Tuchanka’s water is radioactive, from what I understand.”

Garrus, who had grown up with a more straightforward education in galactic history than any human, elaborated. “Tuchanka entered a nuclear winter four thousand years ago. The salarians may have uplifted the krogan, but even they can’t make nuclear waste decay any faster. Water, food, hell, even native building materials have to be decontaminated before they’re used.”

Shepard glanced at Grunt. “Didn’t Okeer tell you this?”

His frown deepened, but he made no reply.

“We turn here,” Jack said.

Shepard followed. “You’re awfully familiar with this place.”

She snorted as though Shepard had said something particularly stupid. “The Alliance aren’t the only people who hoard Cerberus data. I let them take me here. Got what I wanted, and cut loose. Can’t say Eclipse was happy about it.”

“You never stole Alliance data, though.”

“Who says I didn’t?”

“The navy wouldn’t answer my questions about Cerberus, so I stole their data, back in ‘83,” Shepard answered steadily, unmoved by Jack’s barbs. “I knew exactly where to look and it still took effort and no small amount of luck, and I didn’t get everything.”

“Yeah?” Jack grew slightly more interested. “You still got it?”

Shepard thought of Tali on Freedom’s Progress. “A friend of mine might still have a copy. I take it that’s a yes? You never pulled it off?”

“I was doing someone a favor. We met up on one of your Alliance worlds. Benning? It was a military holiday. Fireworks, big parade, shit like that.” Jack tried a hatch, found it unlocked. “He needed a distraction. In return, he’d give me whatever he found on the base.”
She started to enter. Shepard held out her arm, forestalling her, and went in first. She swept her rifle in a smooth arc but found only rack upon rack of computer equipment. It brooded in the darkness without even a single power light in sight, possibly decommissioned. “Would’ve needed one hell of a distraction.”

Water dripped off the nearest server. Jack stalked past it. If she minded Shepard’s caution, it didn’t show. “Stole a ship.”

This said with a certain breezy carelessness that was more smug than anything Shepard had heard in her life.

Garrus stumbled. “You stole a military ship?”

“Hey, they left the launch keys sitting on the pilot’s seat. Definitely livened up the parade.”

Grunt eyed her. “You were like… a pirate?”

Jack considered it. “Sure.”

Grunt seemed favorably impressed. Shepard kept an eye on the shadows. The complete lack of mercs still troubled her, deeply. It meant something she couldn’t quite interpret. “And what happened to your friend?”

“He’s not my friend.” Definitely bitter. “He cut and ran. Didn’t see him again for months. And then nobody saw him anymore.”

Shepard chose not to dwell on Jack’s obvious satisfaction with that last. They reached the far end of the server room, and she tried the hatch. “Locked.”

The first locked door in this whole place, aside from the primary entrance to the garage. Why start locking it down now?

“Move,” Jack said.

Her fist was already glowing. Shepard scrambled out of the way just as Jack’s shockwave crashed into the hatch and bent it outwards. “Let me get a status from Miranda—”

Jack ignored her entirely. She walked up and kicked her boot through the remnants of the door. The pieces fell off their tracks.

Looking back at them were ten guns, with ten very angry mercs set behind them. Jack’s lip curled.

Shepard was moving before the mercs took in enough of the scene to trigger a reaction. Her body slammed into Jack’s at full force. They both crashed into a server rack, just out of line of sight, as the mercs opened fire.

Garrus and Grunt scattered, seeking cover among the shelves. A choking fog rose from the computers as the hail of bullets released a decade’s worth of dust. Garrus leaned out and sighted through the haze.

Shepard was flattened to the cabinets a second time as a blue streak shot by, close enough blow her hair back. She let out a truly exhausted sigh. “They have a commando.”

She took off after the asari biotic, feeling the bullets ping off her shield.

The asari raced ahead, rounding a corner. Shepard heard Garrus cry out.
She skated around the equipment rack and found him sprawled on the floor, shaking off a heavy blow. He gestured forward and wheezed. “Go.”

Shepard turned just in time to take a shotgun blast full-on. The commando grinned with the broadest touch of insanity, delighted.

Her hand lay against the ruins of a server rack. It curled around a mess of wires and hurled whatever was attached in the asari’s direction. She ducked out of sight.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Shepard muttered, and pursued, her boots thudding over the plastic tiles.

Behind her Grunt’s yells mingled with the gunfire, Jack’s biotic warbles and Garrus’ groaning curses. Three on nine was terrible odds. But Shepard had fought asari commandos, and knew even one running loose could destroy them easily.

Shepard followed her down another row, firing as she came around the corner without even bothering to aim at first. The asari let out a yelp of surprise and spent her energy on a barrier.

“Where’s Rawlings?” Shepard asked, more for the look of it than because she expected an answer.

She raised her shotgun. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Shepard spun sideways, but the blast still clipped her shields with a crackle of electricity and the distinctive pop of a shield failure, and scored a long mark across a ceramic plate. She’d activated a mod.

Fuck.

She bolted towards her, dropping low as she fired again, and slid into her legs. Dust had turned the floor slick and Shepard, never a slight woman to begin with, had picked up additional mass courtesy of Cerberus’ heavier artificial modifications. She collided with the asari like a plow and they both went over in a tangle of limbs.

Shepard scrambled for the commando’s gun, struggling under her opponent. The asari reached it a fraction of a second sooner, just before Shepard could get her hands fully around the barrel, and slammed the body of the gun down onto her forehead. Shepard saw stars.

The weight on her chest vanished. Her vision cleared just in time to see the commando race to the end of the row and bolt ahead in another burst of biotic light.

Shepard grimaced and pushed herself upright. Her boots skittered over the plastic, searching for purchase, and then she was up and running after her. Clearly, she didn’t believe Shepard was the most dangerous target here, or she’d have finished her. So who—

Of course.

Grunt had only just started to turn in surprise when the commando reached him. Her fist came up in a savage right hook, wreathed in blue, and knocked him onto his back a good meter away, the whole krogan ton of him. Shepard would not have believed it if she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes.

Shepard hurled herself at her, leaping wildly, twisting her arms around her neck and wrapping her legs about her thighs like a spider monkey. She stumbled, enough for Shepard’s feet to touch solid ground again. She braced her forearm against her neck and pulled it tight with her other hand.
She gasped desperately, abundantly aware Shepard had not targeted her windpipe, and shoved her chin downward, trying to relieve the damming pressure on her artery. Humans and asari were born of different worlds, but they were both bipedal mammals, and brains need so much oxygen. They had similar vulnerabilities.

Her gloved fingers scraped uselessly across the ceramic vambrace of Shepard’s armor. They curled under the edges, pulling like they were trying to tear it off, but Shepard had all the leverage. She sank to her knees.

Her frantic scrabbling faded to a half-hearted scritch. Her head sagged.

Shepard knew better, feeling the tension still lingering in her shoulders, and only tightened her grip.

A scant few seconds later, her muscles sagged for real, letting go into the darkness. Grunt was only just now sitting up, with a spectacular bruise blooming on his jaw. Shepard felt a spike of petty anger, and let the commando fall rather than ease her down. She hit the floor with a meaty thud.

“You alright?” she asked Grunt, drawing her pistol.

He grumbled. She grinned. “Okeer’s tank mother never taught you about sucker punches?”

Up ahead, the fight was fading. A final shot rang out and Garrus called, “Clear! You?”

“Almost done,” she called back, targeted the commando’s leg, and fired.

“You missed,” Grunt rumbled, picking himself up.

“Nah.” She holstered the weapon. “When she comes around, she’ll have to decide whether to crawl after us or patch up to keep from bleeding out, and she’s not stupid. I hit her tibia pretty good. Bet it’s broken all the way through.”

“You should kill her.” Dead certainty in his voice. Also a hint of suspicion.

But Shepard had learned a few things from Wrex about krogan sensibilities. Her look was scolding. “Kill people when you have to. What kind of strength does it show when your enemy’s already defeated?”

“Okeer—” he started hotly. Then his mouth snapped shut. His lips moved.

Shepard let it be. The woman on the ground had started to groan. “Let’s find Miranda and wrap this up.”

They stepped over the bodies of the mercs in the hallway and kept moving towards the back of the facility. Shepard kept her sights fixed ahead, wary of more mercs, but couldn’t ignore Garrus’ rasping breaths. “You ok there, Garrus?”

“Fine.” He would have growled the word, but it came out more as a gasp.

Jack made a sound of disbelief. “Sure, for a guy with half a lung missing.”

“It’s barely even a quarter now,” he protested. The medical attention he received at the Citadel greatly accelerated the organ’s regrowth. In fact, they’d have to be back in not too much longer to shut the process down.
“Quiet,” Shepard said, raising her rifle. “You hear that?”

“What—” Jack started. Then they all heard it, a shuffling, furtive sound.

Shepard motioned them to hang back, and crept ahead, to the intersection with the next hall. She listened for a moment. Then she stepped out and swept her rifle across the width of the corridor, ready to shoot the first thing that moved.

She came face-to-face with the business end of an M-15. Behind it, a single green eye shone in her flashlight. She relaxed.

“Shepard,” said Zaeed, as casually as they’d run into each other at the grocery store rather than in a dank hallway in the middle of an Eclipse base.

She shepherded her rifle. Behind him, she spied Miranda and Jacob, likewise lowering their weapons. It was a safe assumption that Kasumi lurked somewhere nearby. “I thought you guys were at the northwest end of the base.”

“This is a maze,” Miranda said, holstering her submachine gun altogether. “All compliments to Eclipse.”

Shepard got it immediately. “Easy to defend, but hard for intruders to navigate. Especially with the lights cut. Did you manage to find Rawlings?”

Jacob’s mouth thinned. “He’s in this wing. Kasumi’s out scouting the cells.”

“So this was holding.”

“Yes.”

Shepard moved past them and into the nearest room. She couldn’t have laid down flat, not even corner to corner. She hoped Rawlings was short-statured. “This is almost worse than the Purgatory.”

Miranda leaned into the doorway. “You didn’t see this towards the front?”

Garrus shook his head. “No. Some processing rooms, and a big datacenter.”

Shepard crouched by the wall, noting the restraints mounted into the spray-stone. There wasn’t a stick of furniture to grace the room. Not even a hole for toilet. “At least here you’d have somewhere to run.”

Miranda crossed her arms. “Maze, remember.”

It all fell into place. This was where Eclipse took their prisoners. The layout was to prevent escape, not invasion. On the other hand, the batarians took Shepard to Aonia 1, an airless moon, with the only habitable space for hundreds of thousands of kilometers the small hab they controlled.

She could still smell the old gunpowder stench of the dust that crept in past the air seals. Alone with just the dark and that smell. “Still. It’s hope.”

Jack spat on the floor. “Hope is cheap.” Even for her, this was an unusual quantity of venom. “It doesn’t give you shit.”

Shepard noticed then that she was standing well clear of the door, as if she didn’t want to so much
as glance inside. She’d crossed her arms over her stomach. Her fingertips dug into the tattoos curling up her sides, dimpling and distorting their pictures.

“You said you were here before.” Shepard chose her words carefully. “How’d you get out?”

But she needn’t have bothered. Jack unfroze and let out a snort. “How do you think?”

A piece of empty air detached itself, shimmereed faintly with digital static, and resolved into Kasumi. “I found him. You’re not going to like it.”

They followed her further into the winding depths of the base, past the last of the cells and into a larger room. Shepard’s flashlight flicked over clean white walls and stainless steel, marred only slightly by the corpse on the table. Miranda let out a long breath of resignation. Shepard rubbed her forehead. “Well. Crap.”

She went to the body and scanned her eyes along it, a quick, detached evaluation, routine in its morbidity. He was fully clothed, in a tight neoprene suit. They could do anything to him in that without getting messy. “Eclipse started with VI interrogation. Abrasions where they fixed the electrode clamps.”

“How do you think?” Miranda pointed at his mouth. “They tried phenacet as well. You can still see the blue staining on his lips.”

Shepard checked. “You’re right.” Her gaze moved to his gloved hands. She picked one up, and felt along the length, until the knuckle bones slipped sideways, like no finger should move. “I guess when neither of those worked, they moved on to other methods. There’s bound to be other injuries.”

“Any of it could have killed him.” Miranda moved around the table, shining her own light down on his face, into his open eyes. “Rawlings expired no more than four or six hours ago, if I’m any judge.”

Miranda glanced up, and her curious expression instantly smoothed into a bland nothing. Shepard furrowed her brow, and looked over her shoulder. Jacob was staring at them both askance and with faint disgust.

She wasn’t having any of it. “Haven’t you seen a body before, Taylor?”

“You don’t have to be so clinical.” There was something accusatory in his tone.

Kasumi, who had moved to the room’s terminal, interceded. “Whatever they used to interrogate Rawlings, something worked. There’s a data cache attached to his file.”

“Let me take a look.” Miranda typed a query and pursed her lips. Then she relaxed, ever so slightly. “Eclipse copied this off his omni-tool. They couldn’t crack the encryption.”

Shepard glanced down at the dead man with his empty gaze. “He didn’t break.”

“No.” Miranda opened a port on her own omni-tool. “I’ll transfer this cache to the Normandy and then delete the data. Unfortunately, without Rawlings’ key, we’re likely to have the same problem as Eclipse.”

Shepard was more optimistic. “We have an AI. EDI’s processing power should be good for something.”
Her comm activated. “Commander, this is Crewman Oyama, do you read?”

Oyama was their shuttle pilot. Shepard put her finger to her ear to reply. “This is Shepard. What’s your status?”

“Picking up a lot of chatter from down south.” She sounded strained. “Normandy reports shuttle launches from Jalnor. They’re headed this way.”

Zaeed exchanged his thermal clip. “Batarians don’t like us shooting up their rock.”

Shepard ran through what she knew of the base’s layout. “Give me your ETA to the rear entrance.”

“Ten minutes.”

Longer than she liked, but physics rarely cared about her needs. “Prep for a hot landing.”

“Roger that, Commander. Oyama out.”

Shepard dropped her hand. “We need to leave. Miranda—”

“Done.” She stepped away from the computer. The squad hurried down the corridor towards the back of the base.

They didn’t encounter any additional Eclipse as they ran for the exit. Shepard wasn’t surprised; she would lay money Eclipse summoned the batarians from the colony. Zaeed wasn’t wrong about batarian protectionism. If Eclipse was here, it was because the colonists allowed it.

Aware Oyama had her hands full, Shepard radioed EDI. “I need a status on those batarian shuttles.”

“There are eleven inbound to the mercenary base.” EDI was calm as ever.

“Eleven?!”

“If they do not deviate from their present course, they should be overhead in six minutes.” She paused. “They appear to be armed.”

“Fantastic.” She weighed their options. “Oyama will never be able to land clear, and we’ll get torn to shreds trying to reach her. We’re going to the roof.”

Zaeed checked his rifle, almost lazily. “They’ll have that covered, too.”

“A complex this big, they’ll have at least five or six roof accesses,” Shepard reasoned. “They’ll have one or two guys flying around while the rest set down near the two ground entrances. That gives us a chance.”

Jacob shook his head. “Better hope they can’t pick up our position.”

Garrus glanced at her. He’d been uncustomarily silent, a sign of the strain he was trying to hide. Even his voice sounded hoarse. “Had a guy on my squad who could do something like that. Walls, ceilings, it meant nothing to him.”

“Let’s hope the batarians are less resourceful.” She looked at Jack. “Do you know how to get out of here?”
For a moment, her eyes shone like hard brown stones in the darkened hall, unreadable and faintly hostile. Then she started to walk. “I might remember.”

She led them back the way they came, into the wing with the holding cells. As they walked, Grunt shifted uncomfortably. “Feels wrong.”

Shepard didn’t have to ask to know what he meant. The reek of excrement, sweat, and old blood was bad enough. Unspeakable things had happened here. Nobody paused to look into any of these rooms.

Eventually they came to a stairwell. Shepard pushed past Jack and shone her light up to the bend. “Narrow. And wet.”

Jacob made a noise of disgust. “How does anything in this toaster oven of a planet get wet?”

Shepard started up the stairs, keeping her rifle up and ready to fire. “Air conditioning.”

“Air conditioning.”

“Re-circ’s even worse.” She came to the bend, and eased her way around, but only found more of the same. The hatch at the top was lined in daylight. “Some of the maintenance areas on a station can be dripping wet.”

Kasumi was deeply amused, her tone saccharine. “And how would a law-abiding marine officer know that?”

Garrus snorted disbelief. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“Quiet.” Shepard crouched by the hatch and activated her comm. “Oyama.”

“Commander.” Her voice was tight, most of her attention elsewhere. “EDI’s got your location.”

“We’re ready when you are.”

“There’s three shuttles circling the roof. I’m keeping high, but as soon as I start my descent, they’ll be all over me.

Shit. “How long can you hold them off?”

“On the ground? Ninety seconds, maybe. Any longer and I won’t have any shields left to get out.”

“Ok.” She didn’t like it, but she didn’t doubt her, either. “Land with your doors open and get as close to this hatch as you can.”

“Roger that.”

Shepard looked down over her squad, crowded together in the tight stairwell. “We have to sprint. Don’t trip.”

That got a small chuckle. Shepard turned back to the hatch, itching to open it, knowing she had to wait for Oyama or risk attracting the batarian shuttles. Their artillery would make short work of them, crammed together as they were.

The roar of the shuttles got louder. Then came a hail of gunfire scattering off military-grade vehicular shields. Shepard was already reaching for the hatch when Oyama radioed in. “Go!”
She tagged the hatch and burst into the hazy sunlight.

After being inside an unlit base for over an hour, her eyesight was shot. The shuttle was a dark blur. She could hear the other shuttles getting closer, their guns going full tilt. She felt the breeze as a shell exploded into the base not far from their exit.

There was nothing her rifle could do. She tucked her head and ran towards the blur, blinking spots from her eyes.

She found the shuttle with shins and fell as much as stepped aboard. Kasumi collided with her and they landed in a tangle on the shuttle deck. A second later Garrus tumbled in, followed by Miranda, who leapt aboard lightly as a doe. Zaeed landed and turned in one smooth movement, covering their retreat.

Shepard reached for a hand grip and hauled herself up, and then reached out and pulled Jacob in. Jack followed on his heels. Shepard did a quick headcount, aware of the ticking clock. “Where’s Grunt?”

The shuttle shuddered as a shell struck the armor. From the front, Oyama hit a switch and called out. “Forward shield down. We need to leave, now.”

“There.” Garrus pointed.

Grunt was struggling out of the stairwell. It was a small space by human standards. By krogan standards, Grunt would have done better to roll around in grease before he made his way up. He was still fighting the hatch. Too tall to barrel out, and every time he ducked his head, his arms and shoulders moved out too wide.

“Grunt!”

His head jerked up, and banged against the frame, his frustration plain and anger overriding any sense of fear. Good. He could use that. She took another breath and bellowed. “Charge!”

He grinned and disappeared down the stairwell, bumping and scraping— only to re-emerge seconds later, a blur of white armor and gray crest, shotgun clutched to his chest and his shoulders set. The hatch’s metal frame popped out of the plastic hab wall like a stuck cork.

And Grunt, free at last, plunged towards the shuttle like a meteor. The rest of the squad scattered for the walls. Shepard just barely managed to snag the neck ring on Garrus’ armor haul him back before Grunt crashed into the floor.

“Go!” Shepard yelled, but Oyama was ahead of her— lifting off as the word left her mouth, the shuttle hatch still hanging wide open. Miranda hit the switch and it slid shut, closing off the sight of the base dwindling behind them.

Another strike nearly knocked them from their feet. Oyama flipped another switch and grimaced. “Rear shields at ten percent and falling fast.”

Shepard crowded in behind her couch to assess the ladar screen. “They’re sandbagging us?”

“They’re laser turrets are real enough.” Oyama was grim.

Garrus, who had been helping Grunt get upright, fell loosely into a seat. “They just want us gone. Why exert themselves more than necessary to get the message across?”
Sure enough, as they broke atmo, their pursuit fell away, the batarian shuttles turning back towards the colony. The somewhat battered shuttle made it to the Normandy bay without further incident.

As they disembarked, the maintenance crew descended on the shuttle. Matthews audibly gasped as he spied the aft. “Holy hell.”

“What?” Shepard came around to have a look herself, and just stared.

Kasumi, ever curious, joined her. “I don’t think that will buff out.”

A five centimeter hole was drilled through the shuttle’s outer hull, and then further through several cooling pipes. Shepard brushed away some of the debris. Behind it, the inner hull was scorched black. She pushed against it with her thumb.

The metal crumbled into broken ash. The three of them stared through the gap into the shuttle interior.

An eye appeared briefly at the hole, and then Oyama emerged from the shuttle. She regarded the damage. Then, without any trace of inflection, she said, “I’ll be the lounge with a bottle.”

Shepard made no move to stop her as she headed for the elevator. Instead, she turned to Matthews. “Can this be fixed with what we have aboard?”

The question seemed to snap him out of his slack-jawed shock. Matthews frowned. “Maybe. But I don’t have any way to do a hull integrity check in the shuttle bay.”

“Sure you do,” said Shepard, daughter of a former deck chief. “We’ll put someone in a suit and take it outside.”

“Worst case, we need to take it back to Century Station.”

“Century Station?”

He crossed his arms, most of his mind still on the massive job ahead. “Cerberus shipyard. Where the SR-2 was built.”

It occurred to Shepard from time to time that she had no real sense or appreciation for the true size of Cerberus’ operation. She knew Lazarus cell, and she had some inkling of their research labs from her work in ‘83, but the longer she stayed here, the more she was convinced that was like comparing a meteorite to an asteroid. Where the hell did the Illusive Man get this kind of money? Even rich racist donors had practical limits.

There was definitely a cash-generating arm somewhere. If she could, she’d really like to find it before they parted ways. A little gift to take back home.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Goldstein spoke over the ship comm. “Commander, you have an incoming transmission from the Illusive Man.”

“Oh, of course I do.” She looked at Matthews. “Do what you can. If we need dry dock, that’s just how it is.”

“Will do.” He began feeling his way into the shuttle’s wound, getting his bearings.

Shepard headed to the comm room. EDI had already retracted the conference table to allow access to the holopad transmitter. For a moment, she considered blowing off the visual, but she was in too
good a mood after their narrow escape to endure a petty squabble.

The Illusive Man awaited her as she loaded in, with the familiar cigarette in hand. “Shepard.”

Just seeing him made her skin itch. “Look, if this is about going to Ferris Fields, I’ll remind you that you asked me to run this op.”

“I can offer you one better.” He wasn’t amused today. Just hard and distant. “The Collectors are staging another attack.”

“How could you possibly—”

“We’re seeing similar patterns on a colony called Horizon, in the Shadow Sea. Erratic communication outages. Irregularities in shipments to and from the colony.”

Shepard was instantly suspicious. “The Collectors use overwhelming force to accomplish their objectives, just like the reapers. They don’t need to soften the ground.”

“The entire war with the geth was a prelude to a reaper invasion.” He took a drag, blew out the smoke. “What was Sovereign doing, exactly, if not softening the ground?”

“The keepers weren’t responding to his signal. He needed another way onboard the Citadel, to issue it directly.” But there was a hint of doubt. That part of Sovereign’s plan never quite added up. The Citadel fleet was no match for it, and Saren had free run of the Citadel for years. So why make it so much harder?

In retrospect, she thought part of it was denying organics use of the Conduit by locating and subsequently destroying it. Maybe the Protheans came too close to victory for comfort. But there was no reason Sovereign couldn’t have also aimed to undermine their unity and deplete their resources prior to an invasion.

And they knew even less about the Collectors' tactics.

The Illusive Man wore a sly smile, as if he could read her thoughts playing out across her face. “I imagine the attack is only a few days out, at the absolute most. Surely it’s worth the gamble.”

“Absolutely.” She stretched her memory. “Horizon’s right on the border with the Traverse.”

“And home to over half a million people. Larger than any previous target.” He tapped several keys on his console, and a holographic projection of the planet appeared at his side.

She crossed her arms, staring at it. “The Collectors are getting bold.”

“Confident, I’d say.” He tapped off his ash. “There’s a small Alliance presence. Apparently they share your concerns about Horizon’s vulnerable location.”

“Another base, like Ferris Fields?”

He shook his head. “Just a small contingent, upgrading the colonial defenses with new anti-aircraft turrets. Publicly it’s a goodwill gesture to improve relations between the Systems Alliance and these human colonies. But they’re up to something.”

Horizon looked like one giant swamp, broken landmasses scattered through shallow water, and blanketed by forests. A garden world though one not much like Earth. “I won’t run from the Alliance. I was a fool to let you suggest I should.”
A shadow crossed his face, for the briefest moment turning his expression into something deeply unpleasant and rather ugly. But it was gone before she was even certain it was there. “You’re sixteen hours from Horizon. I’ve arranged relay priority for you and paid the fees in advance.”

“We’ll depart immediately.” She turned to the hatch, stepping off the projector.

But as her hand rose to touch the pad, he spoke again. “One more thing.”

Shepard looked over her shoulder, though of course, outside the projector, she could see nothing of him, nor him of her.

She heard him take another drag. Taking his time. “Your former crewman, Kaidan Alenko, is commanding the Alliance detachment. It seems the Collectors have taken an interest in you.”

Everything in her went still. The very air seemed to stop moving.

Another drag. The rush of breath as the smoke left his mouth. Casual, as if he was delivering a weather report rather than a time bomb. “If the Collector’s tactics are even a little conventional, and I think we’re in agreement they are, then the new defenses make ideal first strike targets. I imagine the Alliance will have its hands full without worrying about one Cerberus ship.”

She couldn’t form a reply. Her heart clenched so tightly in her chest she couldn’t even see the hatch half a meter in front of her.

The Illusive Man waited a moment, just the briefest pause. “Good luck, Commander.”

He cut the transmission.

She took a deep breath, all the way down the bottom of her lungs. Closed her eyes. Let it out.

Then she was through the hatch in a blur, turning sharply into Mordin’s lab and calling out orders. “Joker, we’re leaving.”

His reply emerged from the overhead comm. “Already started prepping the ship. Figured we wouldn’t want to stick around and wait for the batarians to change their minds.”

“Screw the checklists.” She tagged the hatch to the lab and entered without breaking stride. “We’re going to Horizon to head off an imminent Collector attack.”

At the end of the lab, Mordin was just raising his eyes from a microscope. He gaped at her.

Joker’s tone changed, reflecting her urgency. “Aye aye, ma’am. Laying the hammer down.”

She turned to Mordin. “Whatever you have for the swarms, I need it now.”

Knowing he’d had the specimens less than a week. Knowing the request was absolutely unreasonable, but utterly necessary.

“Have something,” he said, hurriedly, moving towards the glovebox. “Interfaces with hardsuit armor. Should generate erroneous signals and confuse the swarm.”

Shepard followed him. “English?”

“Swarms should ignore us on the ground. Needs more testing. Clunky. Prototype only.” His eyelids flicked up. “Could use more time—”
“You have twelve hours.” If Joker and the Normandy couldn’t shave time off the Illusive Man’s estimate, she’d eat her shirt. “Tell me how it works.”
Rain lashed against the tall windows in the lobby, thrashing in the pre-dawn twilight with a soft and steady tempo. The overnight clerk stood half-asleep at the front desk. Not a soul stirred, aside from the two marines in the restaurant, gunking out their gear and waiting. For what, Alenko couldn’t say. Only he’d come down circa 0400 local and found Nguyen already here, with her rifle disassembled and her maintenance kit spread across the table, and it said something about the uneasy anticipation lingering over this morning that all he tendered her was an exasperated look for breaking her punishment detail, before sitting down and starting on his pistol.

He didn’t feel any particular urge to speak. Apparently, neither did Nguyen. They worked quietly, without any particular tension. He’d bunkered down for a fight before, and it felt like this. Maybe it was just all the hostility from the colonists finally getting under his skin. Maybe it was that they were this close to finishing the installation, this close to having at least one frontier colony safe. But he didn’t think so.

The elevator dinged its arrival. Alenko watched North step out. “There’s your shadow.”

Nguyen cast her eyes towards the ceiling, as if begging patience. “I hate complications.”

That summoned a memory that cut across the odd edge of this morning. Alenko looked down, but not quite fast enough to hide his grin. She turned sour. “What.”

“My girlfriend used to say that. I’m not sure it was ever true.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t do romantic nonsense. And if you get close enough to someone, nine times in ten they want to drag it there.”

“I’ve had friendships that meant as much to me.”

“Yeah, but you try telling your friend you want to spend your lives together. They change their platitudes quick.” Something so deeply bitter that he couldn’t see the core of it. Then she did a very Nguyen thing, and turned it around. “Anyway, of those people at this table, I’m not the one with a penchant for inappropriate relationships.”

Before he could get past shock, North walked up to the table, stretching and way too damn cheerful for the early hour. “I couldn’t sleep a wink. God, do they have some coffee or something?”

“Breakfast staff’s not even here yet.” Trying not to consider the implications of what Nguyen said. Footsteps in the lobby. “Maybe that’s them.”

But instead they saw Lilith, closely followed by the Traynors, the three of them dripping wet and closing their useless umbrellas. Alenko waved to get their attention. Lilith pursed her lips and hurried over.

“Sorry,” he said. “Comms are out all over the block.”

She wiped the water off her face. “Comms are out all over the colony.”

That was the last thing any of them expected to hear. Nguyen looked up. “You mean the capital.”
“No,” Lewis said. “I sent engineers to each of the outposts, around midnight, to report the outage. I haven’t heard anything back.”

“That’s impossible.” North looked from one face to the next. “Isn’t it?”

Samantha’s voice shook just the smallest bit. She looked at Alenko. “What were you saying about softening the ground?”

He stared at her, processing that.

Lewis cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to disturb you so early. We were headed to my office, and she insisted we stop to inform you and Ms. Hartmann.” He glanced at his daughter. “You’ve gotten more assertive since Oxford—”

“Shit.” Alenko began slapping his rifle back together, as quickly as he could. Which was very fast. Every marine recruit had to be able to do it in under sixty seconds, and Alenko never settled for the minimum effort. Nguyen was close behind, still not fully grasping the situation, but reading his reaction.

Lilith eyed the weaponry askance. “What are you intending? You know we have a general ban on firearms within city limits.”

“I’ll be sure to apologize on my way out.” He looked at Lewis. “When did the blackout start?”

“My engineer said about 37:30. It matches up with the reports here in Discovery.”

Damn this local time. “So that was…”

“Over four hours ago.”

Nguyen shot him a look. “The entire assault on Ferris Fields took only six.”

Alenko loaded the thermal clip and attached the spares to his belt. “Horizon’s a lot bigger than Ferris Fields. And not just in population.”

Lilith glanced between them, her face going pale. “We can’t be under attack. That was the whole point of installing the GARDIAN system!”

Lewis seemed to agree with Lilith. He laughed nervously. “There’s no need for all these dramatics, Commander Alenko. It’s just a technical glitch. I’m sure we’ll have the situation under control shortly.”

He wanted to believe it. But instead, he holstered the pistol, kept the rifle in hand, and brushed past them into the lobby. Then out the door and onto the street, heedless of the rain. He shielded his eyes and scanned the sky. Any invasion would come from space. Had to.

The small group dashed after him, Lilith chiding. “Really, Commander, please—”

“There,” he said. Nguyen swore, unusual for her. North blinked owlishly into the downpour.

Samantha’s mouth dropped open. “What is that?”

Above the buildings, darker than any cloud, too dense for smoke, a large mass approached. Flashes of gold winked from its depths, sparkling in Discovery’s streetlights. Like something moved within. Lots of somethings.
Alenko took a step closer. “Those look like…”

Samantha gave a strangled gasp. “Wings. Beating wings.”

\\\\

Commander Shepard paced behind the pilot’s couch on the bridge of the SSV Normandy, in full kit, ready to roll. As she had been for the past two hours.

“Would you stop that?” Joker was completely exasperated. “You’ve been like a caged varren since we exited the relay. A starving caged varren. Who can smell meat outside its cage.”

She stilled herself with an effort of will, rubbed her hands over the ceramic plate armor affixed to her arms with a grating sound, and then forced herself to stop that, too. “How much longer?”

“About ten minutes less than the last time you asked.” His voice soured. “Which was about ten minutes ago. Shocking.”

EDI manifested in her display niche, and attempted to diffuse the situation. “The ship is making excellent time, Shepard. We should be in shuttle range shortly.”

“Seems like we’ve slowed down.” She’d contemplated throwing things overboard around hour six, just to pick up the smallest margin of speed. They were nearly thirteen hours in transit now.

EDI pulsed once. “Horizon has entered a communications blackout. As a precaution, we engaged the stealth drive at a distance of one AU from the colony. This should allow us to evade detection by a Collector force.”

Shepard snorted. “Because that worked the last time the Normandy encountered a surprise attack by an unknown enemy in the Terminus.”

Joker interrupted. “Absolutely. They definitely didn’t detect our pop out of FTL right beside Alchera before we engaged the stealth drive.” He swiveled in his chair. “I swear, if it wouldn’t shatter half the bones in my arms I’d throw you off this bridge myself. What the hell has gotten into you?”

“This is our first real shot at the Collectors and an entire colony’s on the line,” she answered, stiffly. “It’s a big deal.”

“Yeah, see, usually that just excites you. But you’re nervous as hell. You haven’t even tried to sleep.” He narrowed his eyes. “Something’s up.”

She tapped her foot, bit her lip, glanced out the port at the planet growing ever larger. “Just be ready. I need to brief the ground teams.”

Then she slipped away before he could probe any further. The last thing she needed was the crew to realize how personal this mission had become. It would only lead to questioning her decisions, and nobody had time for that on this run.

Her team assembled in the armory, strapping on armor, checking shield generators, accepting the weapons Jacob passed them. At this point in the mission he knew everyone’s preferences. Mordin stood by making last-minute adjustments to the protections he’d hastily installed on each kit. Tools, scrap, and datapads full of test metrics littered his table.
After a quick count to ensure everyone was present, Shepard cleared her throat. “We’re twenty minutes out, and unfortunately, our Collector friends have already arrived.”

Every head turned to look at her. Miranda holstered her gun. “What’s the plan?”

They’d all worked on pieces of it since leaving Lorek. Shepard had spent the last few hours parsing all their ideas into a coherent strategy, going over and over the details until all that was left was to pace and wait. She glanced at the ceiling. “EDI?”

“Yes, Shepard.” She obligingly projected a three-dimensional map of the capital and surrounding area onto the largest table.

Shepard brushed aside the bits of gear in the way, pointing to the map as she spoke. “The new laser defense cannons are here. We’ll need them to have any hope of securing the colony. The Collectors had the same thought, and parked their ship in the woods over here, barely half a klick away.”

“Wait a minute.” Jacob frowned. “You’re not talking about repelling the invasion?”

She looked up. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. What are you talking about?”

“That’s a heavy cruiser class ship. And the Collectors believe they can subdue over half a million people. Those are bad odds.”

Kasumi weighed in, perched on a chest of heavy ordnance. “Jacob’s right. Recon makes more sense. Get to the ground, figure out what the Collectors want, and get out while the information can still do some good.”

“And take out as many of the bastards as we can while we’re down there,” Jacob concluded.

“The bulk of their advantage is the swarms. We’ll get to those in a minute.” Shepard kept her tone even, but brooked no arguments. The colony deserved better. And every part of her was hyper-aware Kaidan was down there, in the fight, right now. She was coming back with him or she wasn’t coming back. “As for the remainder of the ground forces, yes, we will be badly outnumbered. But their attention won’t be entirely on us. Horizon maintains a volunteer militia two thousand strong, stationed in and around the capital.”

He remained dubious. “Most of whom will be incapacitated by the swarms.”

“Think of the amount of ground they have to cover. If we’re quick and quiet, the forces we encounter should be surmountable. And once we have possession of the GARDIAN turrets, game’s over. That thing can take out their ship if they don’t turn and run.”

Miranda folded her arms. “That means sacrificing any colonists already loaded onto the ship.”

Shepard raised her eyebrows. “You, too? Even I’ll admit we don’t have the resources to seize the ship. Those colonists are gone whether the ship is destroyed or withdraws. But I expect they’ll run.”

“No, I agree with you.” Her eyes were unusually hard. “I’ve tangled with Collectors before. Force is our only common language. I say we hit them where it hurts and deprive them of their ship.”

Garrus checked his rifle. “Count me in.”
There was a murmur of assent. Jacob and Kasumi exchanged a glance, but kept any further objections to themselves. Shepard moved along. “The cruiser’s location means we need to set down on the outskirts of town and make our way to the defense system on foot, to avoid detection. To that end, we’ll split into three squads to maximize the chance one of us will reach the facility, and minimize odds of the Collectors perceiving an organized counterassault. The Normandy will remain stealthed in geosynchronous orbit above the guns.”

She returned to the map. “Oyama will drop Mordin, Garrus, and myself here, in this suburb. Miranda, your team will start in the city and work along the road.” Both squads were likely to encounter strong resistance—Shepard’s in the form of raiding Collectors packing up the local populace, Miranda’s in the form of patrols. Hard to say which would be more difficult. “Jacob, your team will start in the forest. It’ll be slow going due to the density of the vegetation, but enemy presence should be minimal. Bide your time and don’t attract attention.”

He rubbed his chin, studying the map. “Understood.”

“Mordin’s safeguards should keep us off the swarm’s radar. Unfortunately, we don’t know how to terminate the stasis field they create.”

“Nanoscale field generators administered via injection,” Mordin clarified. “Duration limited by small scale and minimal energy resources. Chelation time-consuming. Impractical over a large population.”

Jack snorted. “Overkill.”


Shepard cut off that tangent before it could go further. “There’s nothing we can do for the colonists caught by the swarms, so don’t get distracted trying. The best way to limit abductions is to get to those cannons.”

She said it as much for herself as for them. Shepard absolutely hated that victory would still result in a large number of missing people, but after hours of thought and discussion, she couldn’t see a way around it. And there was a corner of her mind, for the moment under strict lock and key, petrified one of them would be Kaidan.

Zaeed looked up from his rifle. “And this swarm protection thing will work?”

Mordin wavered. “Effective in limited laboratory test environment.”

He grimaced. “This job gets better all the time.”

Grunt leaned over the map. “Why didn’t they blow up the gun? The colonists just left it sitting there for the Collectors to pick off.”

EDI answered. “While construction appears complete, the Collector ship managed to land without sustaining damage. This suggests the system is not yet operational. The squad which reaches the laser cannon first will have to complete initialization.”

Garrus groaned. “And since communications are jammed, EDI can’t help.”

“Correct. Likewise, the Normandy will be unable to track or extract ground personnel until the Collectors are defeated.”
Shepard looked around the room. “Once we leave the shuttle, we’re on our own. Any questions?”

A few dubious expressions, but everyone shook their heads. She’d take it. “Good luck.”

“Good hunting,” Miranda said, and they headed down the shuttle.

Alenko, the colonists, and his squad all stared at the approaching cloud of winged creatures for an interminable moment, the downpour soaking through their clothes.

Alenko raised his rifle instinctively, knowing it wouldn’t make a dent. Even biotics weren’t enough for this. The creatures were too dispersed, and they moved like a flock of birds. “Everyone back inside.”

They didn’t have to be told twice. They rushed into the lobby. Alenko called up the haptic display on the windows, and began to opaque them one by one. The sleepy clerk’s head jerked up. “You can’t do that!”

He ignored her, and looked at Lewis. “With communications down, the colony doesn’t stand a chance. We have to be able to coordinate our efforts.”

Lilith couldn’t stop staring out the windows even as they went dark, hugging herself, hands moving up and down her arms. “Are those things jamming us?”

Lewis shook his head. “The signal’s coming from one massive device, like a radio tower. It’s not dispersed.”

Nguyen snorted. “So we are being jammed. It’s not a network malfunction.”

“I don’t know how anyone could have gotten this tech in place undetected, but yes.” He swallowed. “The system is defended against jamming. The security protocols must have been disabled somehow.”

Samantha spoke quietly. “Or we’re dealing with something more sophisticated than our protocols.”

For a long, somewhat terrifying moment, all Alenko could think was Sovereign managed to jam the entire colony of Eden Prime, and maybe this was the start of the invasion absolutely nobody in the galaxy was ready for. But the reapers had no interest in live subjects in ‘83.

He repeated that a few times until he felt calmer, and finished blacking the windows, cutting off the last view of the street. “It’s a question for later. How do we take the jamming signal offline?”

Samantha glanced at her father. “If we go back to your office, to system central control, I think I can pinpoint the signal’s origin. Maybe counteract it.”

“That’s our plan, then.” With communications restored, coordinating any effort to utilize the GARDIAN cannons or organize a counterattack would be possible. Without it, they were all flying blind.

The clerk was fuming now. Alenko walked over, put his hands on the check-in counter, and tried to think of what to say. “I need you to wake up the other Alliance personnel who are staying in this hotel. My technicians.”
She stiffened. “It’s against policy—”

He interrupted, in the same steady voice. “I don’t have time to do it myself. Tell them the colony is under attack, and they need to proceed to the construction site ASAP and get those defense towers online.”

The clerk went white as a sheet. She swallowed. “The colony— oh, god. Oh my god.”

“Look at me.” There was a certain tone of command every effective officer learned that went straight to the hindbrain and was instinctively obeyed. He didn’t have anything on Shepard’s talent, but it was good enough to snap the clerk out of her nascent panic. “We had some warning, and we have the defenses we need to fight back. We’re going to make it through this but only if everyone does their part. Will you wake my people?”

“Yes.” She took a shuddering breath. “Where will you be?”

“Restoring communications.” He stepped back from the desk. “Once you’re done, gather up the rest of the staff and a bunch of blankets, and lock yourself in the kitchen freezer.”

“Why?” she asked his retreating back.

He glanced over his shoulder. “The freezer’s insulation will reduce your heat signature when they start searching the buildings. Give you a better chance of going undetected.”

She blanched again, but pulled up the guest data on her omni-tool and headed for the elevators. Alenko moved on to the next task. “What’s the best way to get to your building while keeping out of sight?”

Lewis followed him to the door. “If we can get south one block, we can take a series of sky bridges to my office.”

“I’ll take point. Nguyen, you’ve got drag.”

She took stock of her spare thermal clips. “Yes, sir.”

He checked his rifle for the last time, not really wanting to find out what was happening outside, knowing they had no choice. “Keep close. If we’re attacked, get into any cover you can.”

North couldn’t hold her tongue. “We’re not even getting our hardsuits?”

“That cloud of wasps or whatever will be on us before we get back down here, and we won’t be able to move through the street. We have to stay ahead of it.”

A little more blood drained out of her face, but she gave him a grim little nod. He turned to Samantha. “You remember basic?”

“Of course, but—”

Alenko held out his pistol, grip first. She hesitated, and then let out an explosive sigh and accepted it, like a dead rat by the tail.

Her father tried to intervene. “She’s a researcher, not a marine. Darling, tell him—”

She activated the weapon. It unfolded silently in her hand, and she proceeded to pry open the thermal chamber to check the clip, then try the action and weigh the balance, all with obvious experience.
Lewis stared. She pretended not to notice, sighting once. “Let’s go.”

They walked out onto the street.

Discovery in the pre-dawn was a dead city, full of sleeping people and darkened shops. The abductors chose the perfect hour to stage their attack. By the time the colonists knew what hit them, it might well be too late.

The six of them hurried along through the early morning twilight. The creatures in the sky grew larger. Alenko heard the thrumming of their wings, like an enormous hive of bees. He couldn’t begin to guess their purpose. Surveillance? No, the abductors wiped out colonies in a matter of hours. That was brute force, not sophistication. And they did it without any sign of struggle.

“We’re here,” Lewis announced. It looked like a shopping mall. He tried one of the doors, and found it locked. “They don’t usually open until breakfast. Maybe there’s a security guard—”

Alenko took a step back and caved in the doorway with his heel. It snapped inward and shattered the glass, setting off an alarm.

Lilith was scandalized. “You can’t come in here and just— just— action vid your way through!”

“What part of ‘we’re under attack’ do you not understand? We don’t have time.” He stepped through the shards, his wet boots squeaking over the floor, and motioned them inside. “Come on. We need to keep moving.”

He switched on his gun-mounted flashlight, his squad following suit. Store fronts gaped like missing teeth. This wasn’t the Citadel, with small kiosks and holographic goods, with the real stuff packed in warehouses awaiting orders. Each business displayed its wares on racks and shelves. It amounted to a lot of ambush locations. That blind spot between his shoulder blades tensed.

The others felt it too, at least enough to keep quiet, huddling together as they moved towards the escalator. North’s light jerked and twitched in her hands as she jumped at every small sound.

As they reached the second floor, a form rushed out of the darkness, blinding them with its light. Lilith screamed. Alenko whirled in place.

The security guard’s face emerged beside his raised flashlight. “What the hell are you folks doing here?”

Alenko tried to fight down his adrenaline and sudden horror. He’d been this close to firing.

The guard’s eyes lit on Alenko’s gun. He took a step back and put his hand to the can of pepper spray on his belt. “Larry!”

“Look,” Alenko started, but a second security guard materialized nearly out of thin air. Nguyen moved sideways automatically, flanking the guards and training her rifle on the new arrival.

“What, Ronnie? The alarm up front’s going crazy.” Then he saw Alenko’s weapon. His eyes got wide. “Holy shit.”

Lilith crossed her arms with infinite exasperation. “Told you.”

Alenko tried to bury his own impatience. “The colony is under attack.”

“Four people isn’t an attack.” Larry reached for a pair of handcuffs looped through his belt. “No
sudden moves, pal.”

“Aren’t you supposed to have him put the gun down first?” Lewis asked.

“Dad!” Samantha hissed.

Ronnie had a horrible grin. “Good idea.”

Alenko opened his mouth to tell them, with as much diplomacy as he could summon, that there was no way in hell that was going to happen. But then he heard a sound—rasping, buzzing, echoing through the corridor. He turned in place, aiming into the dark. North whispered under her breath, so terrified she was almost squeaking.

“Stop!” Larry was pissed. “Hey, I’m talking to you!”

By the illumination of their flashlights, Alenko saw a shimmer of wings. “Run!”

Samantha took off like a shot, responding to that tone like anyone who had lived through basic training, dragging her half-stumbling father after her, North on their heels. Nguyen held until they gained some ground and followed, guarding their backs.

Lilith stood rooted to the spot, agape.

There were only three of the creatures. As they flew closer, Alenko could see they resembled wasps, in the same way as geth ships, or Sovereign itself. Too smooth and geometric to be natural. Their outsized wings beat at the air with surprising speed. And beneath their bellies, they carried stingers the size of a syringe barrel.

The bodies in the Nephilim lab had single puncture wounds and no other marks, not even self-defensive injuries like torn fingernails. Each corpse wearing a look of total surprise frozen into their face.

Without thinking, Alenko fired at the nearest. It rolled away from shot like a fighter pilot and dove towards Ronnie.

Alenko shouted a warning. “Move!”

But the guard had barely started to turn his head when the wasp sunk its stinger deep into his shoulder. His expression froze. Alenko couldn’t be certain, but thought he recognized the faint shimmer of a stasis field. Lilith screamed again.

He shoved her. “Go!”

She stumbled forward. Alenko grabbed her arm and took off. A glance over his shoulder saw the other wasps descend on Larry. He unleashed a wave of biotic energy behind them, trying to separate the wasps from their target, give the man a fighting chance, but it was too late. He ran faster.

“The sky bridge,” Samantha panted as they drew level. She pointed ahead.

They rounded the corner and raced out onto the bridge between buildings. Then she stopped dead in her tracks. Alenko almost collided with her. “What—”

“Look.” Her hand shook.

Wasps poured through the street below in the first light of day. The unlucky few colonists who
found themselves about at this early hour stood frozen where the wasps took them. One man who tried to run lay fallen in a puddle, rainwater running over his cheek towards the drain.

But the worst was the aliens dragging paralyzed bodies from the buildings and piling them into floating sarcophaguses, ready for transport.

“What are they?” North breathed, as though she were afraid to speak.

“Collectors.” Alenko would never forget them. “God, we knew they wanted human genetic material, but how are they acting on this scale without anyone suspecting?”

“Collectors are a fairy tale,” said Lewis, but with little conviction.

Nguyen shook her head. “We didn’t see any evidence of this at that Archer’s old lab. Cerberus’ victims said they only saw Collectors the one time before the attack, when they picked up the clones.”

“If this was Cerberus, we’d see Cerberus.” But it still didn’t feel right. They still had no real idea of the relationship between Cerberus and the Collectors.

Samantha glanced at Alenko sidelong. “At least you’ll have some worthwhile intel to take back to the Alliance after all.”

That earned him a few startled glances. “Kinda not priority one right now.”

“If anyone even believes you.” Lilith shook her head. “I don’t believe it, and I’m watching it happen.”

“Just like the good old days.” Nobody ever believed them about the reapers, either. Alenko finally tore his eyes away from the street below. “Keep moving. Our timeline just got a lot shorter.”

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Oyama set Shepard’s squad down on the outskirts of a Discovery suburb, right in the middle of some unlucky soul’s backyard. Here, the forest had been beaten back, a little at a time, to provide space for prefab habs, kitchen gardens, makeshift soccer fields and the other vestiges of ground-bound human colonial life.

She stepped down into a deep puddle that splashed mud up to her thighs. Heavy rain plastered her hair to her skull before her support even exited the shuttle.

Salarians being amphibious, Mordin hardly noticed the deluge, moving lightly over the grass and scanning the sky for swarms. She took a single step to follow him.

Then Garrus landed heavily on both feet, and splashed her all the way up her back. Shepard froze, a pained expression on her face.

Garrus looked from her fouled suit to the muck at their feet. “Uh… sorry.”

She wiped the water off her face with a muddy glove, leaving streaks behind. “I hate planets.”

Cackling from the shuttle. Oyama shifted the drive core into lift mode, lowering the mass and allowing it to rise. “Catch you later, Shepard.”

In theory, use of the shuttle’s thrusters was required to pivot the shuttle away from the squad and clear the LZ. It was a complete coincidence that the manner in which Oyama executed this
necessary maneuver launched a tidal wave of muddy water, slopping over top of both of them.

Shepard stared into the middle distance, sludge dripping into her eyes. “This mission is off to a fantastic start.”

Mordin held a scanner in both hands, turning this way and that, frowning faintly. “Jamming in full effect. Swarm signals barely above background noise. Cannot anticipate movements.”

Shepard raised her eyes to the sky. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Rivers of dull gold-brown seeker wasps ran through the clouds, filling the air with their droning. Though they scattered close to the ground to find their targets, diluting their numbers, the massed swarms overhead remained a sobering sight.

Garrus cleared his throat. “You sure these armor upgrades will do the trick?”

“Certainty impossible.” Then he brightened. “Looking forward to seeing if we survive.”

Shepard drew her rifle. “Let’s move. We don’t have much time.”

Their boots tromped over the deadened grass as they descended towards the habs, the downpour washing the muck from their suits. Raindrops pinged off the metal roofs like popcorn. It brought Shepard back to late summer storms under her grandmother’s porch as a small child, so strongly she could smell the water hissing into the baking Arizona dust.

She hated weather as a general rule. The memories made it all the worse, those little reminders that these were real homes, lived in by real people, who were very much missing just now. And Kaidan was somewhere in this mess.

She’d tried to contact him with a warning after the Illusive Man’s pronouncement. But either the comm blackout wouldn’t let her messages through, or Cerberus was blocking them. It didn’t make much practical difference.

The stillness here was downright eerie. Eventually, Garrus couldn’t take it anymore. “This is our war zone?”

“It’s just like Freedom’s Progress.” Shepard nodded towards a bookbag spilled across the grass. “Things just dropped in place. The swarms act fast.”

Right on cue, a seeker flew by, lazily, in an obvious search pattern. It passed within twenty centimeters of her left arm without so much as a sniff in her direction.

They all watched it go with a certain relief— instantly crushed by Mordin’s overwhelming need for exacting accuracy in all things. “Effective against small swarms. Makes sense, lab testing used small population. Hope no need to test against full force of swarm.”

“Save it for the report.” Shepard peered ahead.

“What is it?” Garrus craned his neck.

“Don’t know.” She frowned. “Something familiar.”

It was like being gently tickled by an invisible feather. She couldn’t even say what it was she noticed. Something her body recognized, and didn’t expect. Even by recent standards it felt damn odd.
“Picking up movement on scanner.” Mordin’s gaze shifted urgently. “Large force inbound.”

Shepard turned automatically towards… whatever it was. Every hair stood on end, from her hack job hair cut to the fine down along her arms.

Then it came— a low groaning, an animalistic sound torn from once-human throats. “Husks!”

She dove for the shelter of a garden wall, Garrus just a hair behind her. Mordin ducked into the shadow of a stoop.

The husks barreled forward as they always did, their windmill gate throwing arms and torsos ahead of their legs, swinging wildly, mouths agape and every line of their misappropriated bodies limned in blue light. During the war with the geth, they were Sovereign’s favorite cannon fodder. Shepard’s, too. Their origins disgusted her, but they were made of spit and cobwebs, and who wouldn’t take that in a fight over facing the geth?

Instincts honed across those six months took hold. She shot at their knees, taking their legs out from under them. They tumbled down in a spray of mud. Garrus, as much a veteran of the geth war as she ever was, took the same approach. Mordin, however, shot at their chests, to little effect. There was nothing left to beat or bleed.

“Legs!” Shepard popped her thermal clip and jammed in a fresh one. “Aim for their legs!”

“Understood!” He adjusted his targeting and brought the nearest down.

Within a few minutes it was all over. The husks began to dissolve into ash.

Shepard walked up to one and prodded it with her foot, a bit of the remains crumbling over her toe. “I never wanted to see these damn things again.”

Garrus shrugged, not indifferent, but accepting. “Guess there’s our proof the Collectors are agents of the reapers.”

Mordin pulled out his scanner again, taking readings. “Alliance claimed husks made from repurposed colonists in the last war. Similar tactics? Would explain need for numbers.”

Shepard shook her head. “No. The geth put people up on spikes to turn them into husks. We haven’t seen any.”

“Or smelled any,” Garrus added darkly, exchanging a look with Shepard haunted by the stench of offal they found alongside the cluster of dragon’s teeth in the mining vessel Cornucopia’s hold, the iron tang of blood pooled thickly beneath them. She’d never forget it.

Mordin squatted by a corpse, taking a few readings. “Odd way to create troops. No stamina, no durability, no apparent cognition for intelligent decision-making. Only valuable to slow down and distract opposing forces.”

“They’re damn quick, too.” Shepard watched him. “What kind of work did you do with STG?”

He didn’t look up from his data. “Studied efficacy of genophage on Tuchanka. Birth rates, mutations, transmission.”

“So no real combat experience.”

His look was complete disbelief. “Worked out of slums aboard Omega. Anyway, STG a magnet
for combat. Unavoidable even for data acquisition. Enough experience to be dangerous.”

A hint of a joke in that last. She smiled, quick and silly, despite herself. “Keep moving. It’s a long hike to that gun.”

The sheer stillness of the suburb compelled them into tense silence as they walked northeast. The air seemed to echo with the sounds of all the people who weren’t there—children running between the habs, their parents gossiping as they tended to breakfast. Air car canopies slamming shut as people left for work.

Small gardens dotted the yards. Shepard had spent just enough time in the colonies as a kid to remember the vegetable patches. Hell, even on Arcturus people had peppers and tomatoes coming out of every spare shoebox they could fill with dirt. There was something about fresh food, something lost on a long-haul merchant convoy, stasis bins or no.

Water sheeted off the habs, filling their gaping hatches with waterfalls and flooding the rooms beyond. They couldn’t ascertain when the invasion began. But judging from the state of this neighborhood, she guessed not long into the morning. Breakfast sat burnt on hot stoves. Cars were parked beside the habs, some with doors yawning open, as if the occupants had been dragged from their seats, the upholstery soaked beyond repair.

Shepard wiped her hand along her face, temporarily alleviating the rain. “All this wet makes you wish it wasn’t a garden world.”

It broke through the uncanny silence, as she hoped it might. Garrus chuckled, light and dry. “The Collectors picked a hell of a day for a raid.”

She raised her eyes to the deluge and pointed. “That’s their ship. They’re still on the ground. Keep moving.”

It took Alenko and his makeshift team over an hour to pick their way across the city under siege to Lewis Traynor’s office.

The long walk dispelled any notion that this was an invasion. An invasion implied a fight. Discovery’s population folded almost immediately to the swarms and were just as efficiently packed into pods for delivery back to the ship.

Truthfully, the wasps worried him more than the Collectors. Collectors he could shoot. If they were caught by a swarm, it was game over. For them, and the colony.

So they stuck to the mid-levels of buildings, away from windows and elevators. Every so often they heard another wanderer. But as Alenko pointed out, right now, more civilians just made them a bigger target. Lilith hadn’t liked that, but even she realized it wasn’t the time for arguments.

It wasn’t as if he liked it any better. The few people they found knocked out by the swarms looked beyond terrified, eyes darting in every direction, taking shallow breaths. The paralysis barely left them enough movement to keep alive. Every human instinct he had wanted to stop and help them in any way he could, but his rational mind knew the best aid available was to drive the Collectors out. Didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

They paused, barely breathing themselves, as a two-man Collector patrol passed their position, looking for more victims. Alenko forced himself to take in some air. “How much farther?”
Lewis Traynor barely managed a whisper. “Two floors up.”

They were halfway to the proper floor, in the concrete stairwell, when they heard it.


“Shh.” He craned his neck, trying to see up the stairwell through the small gap where it switched back on itself. It was just dark enough to imagine anything you wanted to see—or feared to see. He reached for reason, for calm sanity.

A rasping screech, more air than noise, the kind of whisper that carried, echoed down the halls. North let out a low moan, a primal sound beyond screaming or cursing.

Lilith’s breath was loud in the dark. “What is it?”

“Husks.” He’d never forget. “We need to move. Lewis?”

“It’s this way.” He took off at a jog, until they arrived at a hatch with “SERVERS” emblazoned across the front. Lewis put his palm to the scanner and the door slid back. A wave of cold air hit Alenko full force, and made him shiver. He didn’t realize until that moment how much he was sweating.

The team crowded into the room and secured the door, but it lent little comfort. Samantha went to the main console. “We should be able to trace the jamming signal from here.”

She and her father crowded around the screen. It shed the only illumination in the room, eerie and orange, like an omni-tool, pulling long shadows from the four tall rows of equipment.

“This can’t be right,” Lewis muttered, his face a rictus in the weak light.

Alenko hovered at his shoulder. “You found something?”

He shook his head, lips pressed tight, and continued issuing commands to the system. After a hesitant moment, Samantha turned to him. “Remember when we told you the comm system is resistant to jamming?”

“Yes.” Clearly they were mistaken, but it wasn’t time to rub it in.

She crossed her arms. “It’s a very sophisticated algorithm, one that rivals what we use for military networks in the Alliance. We use broadband antennae. If anything comes through the system that even hints at deliberate interference, the system shifts frequencies. It’s enough to keep the information coming through until the signal generator can be found and neutralized.”

Lilith swelled, her face touched by pride. “Developed right here on Horizon.”

Samantha nodded. Alenko frowned. “But something is jamming the network.”

“Sabotage,” Lewis answered, grimly. He called up one final screen and pointed to the damning evidence. “Somebody found a vulnerability in the system and disabled the protective subroutine. They’ve been running small tests all over the colony for weeks. And now the system’s dead.”

All hint of smugness dropped off of Lilith. Her mouth fell open. “That’s why we’ve had all these outages? Why didn’t we detect it?”

“The colony’s growing. Outages are to be expected.” Clearly the admission pained him. “Nobody was looking beneath the surface.”
Nguyen muttered something, North making a whispered reply. Alenko addressed the one salient question. “Can you fix it?”

Father and daughter exchanged a glance that was only too clear. “I can do a system-wide restart, and maybe some kind of quick fix, but a proper patch will take weeks.”

Shit. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to think, feeling like they were on Plan Q at this point.

The whispering had continued unabated. Then Nguyen spoke up, loud enough to make them jump. “Tell them, Rianne.”

All eyes turned to North, who gulped. “I kept looking at the sabotage I found on the GARDIAN system.”

Samantha blinked. “Sabotage—”

Alenko waved her silent. “Go on.”

“It directly interfered with the comm protocols. That’s why we couldn’t get a good uplink to sat comms.” She took a breath. “It wasn’t there before we landed, sir, you know it wasn’t. All electronics are manufactured in secure factories. The workers pass fifteen year background checks. And it’s all independently screened before it ships.”

He glanced at the hatch. “Private, we’re a little pressed for time.”

“Right. I’m saying, what if it’s the same person? The colony had all their experts out to the site the last few days.”

Alenko got it immediately. He nodded to the console. “Do it.”

She wormed in between the Traynors with an awkward, apologetic look, and glanced through the code. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s similar.”

Lewis shook his head. “It’ll take days, or weeks, to excise all the bad lines.”

“No, I wrote a program. Just messing around with the file downloads in my hotel room.” She opened her omni-tool. “It’s similar enough. I think…”

Lewis set his jaw, stubborn. Samantha got his attention. “Worst case, it destroys the live network, which isn’t working anyway, and we have to restore from backups. Without comms the colony’s doomed.”

He didn’t say yes. Maybe he couldn’t bring himself to. But he stepped aside. North uploaded her program. They all watched with baited breath.

“I’ll be damned.” Lewis scrolled through the results. “The system’s responding. We need to find the jamming tower. If we watch the systems come back online…”

“That’s it,” said Samantha. “They’ll do a quick blast across all their transmission frequencies. Garbage data, but it should let us triangulate the jamming tower’s location. It needs to receive the signals before it can adjust.”

“And then we’ll have full comms?” Lilith asked.

Lewis shook his head. “I doubt it. There’s still a lot of residual damage from the tampering, or
we’d have them now. But we can find the tower, and disable it manually, perhaps.”

It was the best chance they had. Alenko nodded. “Let’s do it.”

A shriek came from the hall. They each turned towards the hatch.

Alenko checked his rifle. “Is that the only way in?”

Lewis nodded. He seemed too afraid to speak, his eyes round in the dark.

Another screech. The husks were hunting. He took a breath, moved up to the hatch as quietly as he could, and took up a guard position. Nguyen joined him, and after a moment, North, albeit shakily. Ready to shoot whatever came through that hatch. “Work fast.”

Without being asked, Samantha moved to another terminal, adding her efforts to find the jamming tower. Lilith folded her arms across her stomach and frowned, trying not to look as worried as she clearly was.

The waiting was always the worst of it. The Traynors had their work to distract them; for the rest, all they could do was listen to the sounds growing in the hallways beyond this room, grunts and footsteps and the intermittent buzzing of the wasps, punctuated by the occasional thump of a body being loaded into a sarcophagus. Wondering when— not if— the Collectors would get around to investigating this room. Trying to breathe softly, cringing as Samantha swore under her breath.

Alenko’s awareness narrowed to the gun in his hands and the hatch before him. Meditation was an old skill, and a necessary one with an implant as temperamental as the L2, and it helped him here. He let go of everything that was not guarding that hatch. Impatience, fear, anxiety that they would not find the tower and worries about what the hell they could do with that information anyway, concern for the people in this city and curiosity about the Collectors and their motives. There was only this moment and the one that came next.

“I’ve got it.” Samantha, a harsh whisper in the flickering orange glow.

Lilith and her father hurried over. Alenko allowed himself a glance in their direction, but did not leave his post.

Samantha gestured at her screen. “I created a time-domain plot of every signal burst received before the transmitters were blocked again. Once you correct for distance, you get this pattern.”

Lilith leaned over her shoulder. “That’s the forest east of the GARDIAN construction site.”

Samantha raised her eyebrows. “Maybe the Collectors deployed it when they landed?”

A thud came from the ceiling— the dull sound of something heavy hitting sheet metal.

All three of the civilians went rigid. North let out a strangled cry. Nguyen directed her light upwards, glinting off bronze carapaces and iridescent wings. “Wasps. In the ventilation.”

Even as they watched, a wasp threw itself against the vent again. The grate dented.

Alenko cast another glance at the hatch. “We need to get out of here.”

Something banged against the hatch. Lilith jumped. Samantha reached for her father’s arm, blindly seeking comfort, or protection. He gathered her hand in his and held it tightly. “We can’t go through there.”
The air vent gave another groan as the wasps increased the pace of their attacks. Alenko tried to think. “We can’t go back to the stairwell. Is there another way down?”

Lewis shook his head, numbly, but it looked more like fear than a reply. Alenko shook him by the shoulder, made him look up. “Is there another way down?”

He wet his lips. “There’s a, a ladder. In the elevator shaft. Fifteen meters left from the door.”

North let out a low moan. The thuds from front and above were now incessant.

“Ok.” Alenko looked at the hatch. “Ok, we’re getting out of here. We’re going to open the hatch and shoot whatever’s on the other side. Run for the elevator.”

*And hope to god they’re not husks.* Alenko remembered how well they could climb. Like spiders. “Lilith, I need you to get the hatch. I can’t fire and activate it at the same time. Samantha—”

“I know.” She stepped over beside his meager row of marines and raised her pistol. Her hands shook.

Lewis began to protest, but fell silent when she shot him a glare. “Don’t. Just… don’t. This is awful enough already.”

Alenko likewise raised his rifle. “I’ll take point once the hatch is clear. Be ready to run.” At their nods, he glanced at Lilith. “Tag the hatch, and get the hell clear.”

She put her back to the wall beside the door, and stretched her arm out over the hatch, hovering near the holographic activation. Alenko sighted and called up his barrier. “Do it.”

Three things happened at once:

Lilith tagged the hatch open.

Husks poured through the door.

And the ventilation grate finally gave way, spilling a half dozen wasps into the room.

Alenko and Nguyen opened fire before the hatch was fully ajar. Lilith screamed and slid down the wall, covering her head with her arms. One husk went down. Alenko switched targets, but now the rest were inside, and North stood frozen beside him.

“Private North!” He took out a second at the knees. It collapsed, those spindly fingers clawing at the floor. There was no room for biotics and his gun was not enough.

She stood shuddering. Tears streamed down her cheeks in silent rivulets.

Traynor recovered herself enough to fire at last, but the shots went wide. Swearing continuously, incoherently.

The three remaining husks were almost on them. He would not be able to get them all—

And then the one in front of him went down heavy with Lilith on its back. She was still screaming, flailing at it with both hands, fingernails raking it like claws.

Nguyen fired at the husk beside it, but it pinwheeled erratically, fast, and hard to hit. She had her hands full trying to defend herself and North, who had collapsed.
The fifth reached for Samantha. She stumbled back and collided with a server rack. He fired. Its head exploded into goo and cybernetic wires. The husk fell sideways onto the floor.

A wasp flew at his face. He shot wildly, and hit it by sheer luck. “Come on!”

He hauled Lilith up by her arm. Samantha reached for her father, who stretched out his hand—

And froze solid with his fingers inches from his daughter’s.

Her hand closed on his and yanked, disbelieving. Lewis overbalanced and fell over without twitching a muscle. A wasp wriggled in his back, attempting to dislodge its stinger.

Another wasp flew at Alenko. He batted it away, hard enough to knock it into the wall, and grabbed Samantha. “We have to leave!”

“No—” She tried to tear herself loose. A wasp missed her by inches, its trajectory carrying it back up to the ceiling where it prepared to dive again. He caught it in a stasis field, freezing it in midair, but only temporarily.

There was no time to argue. He wrapped his arm around her waist and dragged her from the room, Lilith close behind. Nguyen got North on her feet and stumbled out. She shut the hatch the moment they were clear. The security indicator flashed red, the door secure.

Only then did Alenko let Samantha go. She slapped the locked hatch with her palm, once, and sagged against it. Her shoulders heaved.

He put a hand on her back, tentative. “The only thing we can do for him is get to that jamming tower.”

She whirled and shoved his arm away. “Shut up.”

Then she stalked off down the hall. Alenko saw then her pistol was somewhere on the floor behind them, locked behind that hatch, and decided with a flash of guilt that it didn’t matter much, anyway.

North was in hysterics, shaking and crying. He glanced at Nguyen. She answered the unspoken question. “I’ve got her.”

They hurried to the elevator. Collector movements were all around them—walking, dragging, the meaty thump of a body being lifted and dropped into a sarcophagus. But for the moment they had the corridor to themselves. Alenko didn’t trust it to last.

The attack seemed to have focused Lilith, though Samantha had nearly shut down. She stood vacantly as they pried open the door, and had to be coaxed out onto the ladder. It was a thin thing, barely thirty centimeters across, feather-light aluminum. It stretched down into an abyssal dark.

North made a low sound. At first, Alenko thought it was the height, but then he saw it, too. A blue glow, coming around the corner at the end of the hall.

“More husks,” Nguyen said. “A lot of them.”

“Get them down the shaft,” he said, jerking his head at their team. “I’ll hold them off and join you at the bottom.”

She glanced between the growing glow and Alenko. “There’s no way.”
“I gave you an order.” He stepped forward, giving them space. “Go.”

To her credit, she didn’t hesitate further. Lilith made a weak protest, but Nguyen overruled her and got her onto the ladder. Alenko moved ahead, readying himself, his fist beginning to glow.

The instant the first of the husks came into range, Alenko unleashed his attack, an assault on what passed for a husk’s nervous system, a rough collection of cybernetics. The husk staggered, keening, lit up and blocking the path of its associates. Alenko didn’t like using this particular skill and hadn’t yet been able to bring himself to use it against living targets. But he needed it right now for what he planned next.

A few seconds later, the husk was surrounded. And that was when Alenko threw it as hard as he could.

For a moment it was too bright to see. The biotic detonation took out a large section of the hallway, blowing out the drywall and raining down the ceiling tiles. Not even ash remained of the husks.

Behind him, North made a kind of strangled sound. He turned, brow furrowed, and she flinched back from him. Even Nguyen was staring, her eyes flicking between him and the destruction beyond. His heart sank in a way that was only too familiar. But there wasn’t time to deal with it now. “We need to keep moving.”

Then North glanced passed him and screamed. He whirled. Another group of husks, coming up fast.

He shot at them to buy some time. Nguyen shoved North down the ladder and threw herself after. One husk went down. He couldn’t risk a single one remaining, not with the way they could climb. And he’d burned through a lot of energy today already.

Time to be smart. He tossed the group back, just enough power to knock them over, and scrambled for the ladder. Calling up a barrier as he did so. Hoping the husks would behave exactly the way he remembered, with single-minded stupidity.

Alenko could not risk dropping his only remaining weapon, and the rifle’s flashlight would not work with the gun folded into its storage configuration. Resigned, and lacking a proper holster, he stuffed it down his shirt. The barrier’s faint glow provided the barest bit of illumination. It also made him a target.

So when the husks started down the shaft a few minutes later, they zeroed in on him immediately.

He waited. Even as the first reached for his shirt, even as he felt its bony fingers tear at the cloth as he shoved away its arm, he waited. And kept descending. The second arrived, screeching, its mouth lunging for his shoulder. He elbowed it, hard, but it kept its grip on the wall. One left.

His sweaty hand slipped. He fell two rungs before his feet caught, adrenaline lancing through him like a toxin. The husks pounced. Alenko shut his eyes, clamped down on the ladder, and detonated the barrier.

It wasn’t a lot of force. He hadn’t had much energy to give it. But it was enough to knock the husks loose. The others let out yelps of surprise as the husks plummeted down the shaft, their screaming hisses following them all the way to the bottom, until they fell abruptly silent with a very final thud of pulpy meat hitting ground.

Alenko rested his forehead on the cool metal, letting himself catch his breath. There could still be
more coming. They had to get out of here. “Is everyone alright?”

There was a chorus of agreement. He wiped his hands on his pants, one by one, and renewed his descent. Without his barrier, there was no light. They descended blind into the long abyss.

It was so black in the elevator shaft that Alenko could almost see his hands groping for the rungs, a spectral image laid over his eyes. Like his brain couldn’t cope and was inventing scenery from what it could feel. It spooked him more than husks and Collectors combined.

Time had no meaning in a night this deep. A minute or a lifetime later, his boot hit solid ground. He could hear Lilith and Samantha breathing somewhere behind him, Nguyen and North together ahead. “I’m going to turn on the flashlight now.”

He closed his eyes, an act that felt ridiculously redundant, found his rifle, and flicked it on. Even with that precautionary measure it felt like a small nova had gone off in the shaft. It took several moments to clear the dazzle.

Evidently, his team had a similar experience. They blinked at him owlishly.

Nguyen spoke first. “We need transportation. That means heading out onto the street.”

“First things first.” He looked up at the elevator doors, the bottom level with his waist.

Their position was too awkward to get good leverage, so it was slow going. And Alenko spent some time peering through the first small crack, trying to gauge what waited for them in the building lobby. “Looks clear.”

“I can’t be out of here soon enough.” Lilith sighed, and wedged her hands back into the crack between the doors. “On three?”

They counted and heaved. The doors gave way slowly, until there was just enough room to crawl out. They boosted out Samantha, and then Lilith. North scrambled after. Nguyen boosted herself out, and then turned and helped Alenko wriggle out onto the floor.

The lobby was vacant. Chairs were overturned, papers and datapads scattered over the tiles. Samantha stared in dismay.

“Hey,” Alenko said, still feeling guilty for everything that happened upstairs. “This is good news for your dad. If they already took everyone, they won’t be looking for him.”

“We don’t know what that… thing did to him.” A little acid in that, but mostly, she sounded lost. And worried.

But Alenko had the answer to that question. He’d felt the energy signature wash over him as Lewis was stung, and put it together with the glimpses of the trapped people they’d found. “It’s a stasis field. Absolutely run-of-the-mill.”

“He’ll be fine?” She didn’t sound as if she quite believed it.

“As long as we get rid of that ship.” He cleared his throat. Right now, he’d kill for a water bottle. “Speaking of which…”

“A transport. Yes.” She walked towards the exit.

The five of them emerged onto the street. A slow, soaking rain continued to fall, the sun a gray
glow behind the clouds. With no sign of Collectors or swarms, it felt disconcertingly like a Saturday morning back in Vancouver, the kind fit for curling up by a window with a book and a coffee. Alenko shook his head to clear it. “I don’t see any cars.”

Lilith pushed her wet hair off her face. “Within the city, most people take the maglev.”

The beating of wings came, louder than the rain, and down the street a figure alighted on the pavement. Dull bronze, it had a thick triangular head and four yellow eyes, and looked like whipcord over bone.

For a long moment they stood watching each other. There was nowhere for the humans to hide. Alenko raised his rifle.

The Collector took a step forward. He fired. It barely noticed.

He let off another two bursts. All it did was chip away at the thing’s chitin. “Run—”

Up ahead, someone gunned an engine.

The truck hurtled down the street at top speed. The driver didn’t even tap the brakes as he collided with the Collector. The alien flew up the hood and bounced off the roof with a pulpy crack.

Then the truck skidded to a stop beside them. Marlon opened the door. “Need a lift?”
The Hard Road

*August 2185*

Twenty minutes later, they’d left the urban center of Discovery, the taller purpose-built structures giving way to pre-fab modular habitats.

“I figured the only shot we have is getting that cannon online,” Marlon was saying, as they headed out of town. “Getting the truck out of the garage was a bitch. Those bastards are everywhere.” Then he patted the dash. “But the wasps aren’t any match for good old-fashioned steel and glass.”

Samantha stared out the window through the rain, at the empty streets scattered with the discarded dross of their citizens. Purses, lunch bags, umbrellas by the dozens. “This was my home.”

She sounded more appalled than shocked. Alenko took that as a good sign. That spark of natural defiance he’d seen at the construction site was coming back. And in all fairness to her, he couldn’t begin to imagine Vancouver like this— much less leaving his dad behind out of sheer overriding necessity.

He doubted she’d forgive him for that. He just hoped she could forgive herself, eventually. Alenko cleared his throat and changed the subject. “Where did we leave the guidance calibration yesterday?”

Lilith answered. “The targeting matrix won’t behave. It’s just as likely to target the orbital substation, or a merchant freighter, as an enemy. What’s wrong with her?”

She stared at North askance, huddled up in a corner of the truck, down on the floorboards and leaning against Nguyen’s legs. The husks coming through the door left her near-catatonic. Only Nguyen’s prodding had kept her moving. Alenko sat back. “Nothing’s wrong with her.”

“I thought you marine types were here to protect us.”


But Lilith was tired, afraid and angry in the face of their inability to do much against this invasion, and her frustration had found a target. “She just sat there wailing while husks poured into the room. I’ve still got them under my fingernails!”

Alenko twisted in his seat to look her in the eyes. “You want something in reach to blame. I get it. But you don’t know what you’re saying, and you’re going to stop this now.”

“Oh what?” She continued unabated. “If she’d just gotten off her damn ass, we would’ve been out of there before those wasps got Lewis.”

Even Samantha started at that. But it was North who answered, with unexpected volume, rousing briefly from wherever her mind had gone. “Fuck you.”

Lilith blinked. North went on, her voice tight, every word a fury. “Those things came into our hab and took my mother. You think I wanted that to happen to her dad? They took my mom and they — they put her on —” She took a breath, closed her eyes. “The commander’s right. You don’t know shit about anything and you need to shut your mouth.”

Lilith took a look around the cabin for support, found none, and made a sound of disgust and flung
herself back in the seat, crossing her arms. North stared at her a moment longer, then dropped her gaze back to the floor and mumbled something, retreating back into that not-place.

Alenko returned to the point. “We need a fix for the targeting.”

Nguyen prodded North. When she got no response, she prodded a little harder, quite literally taking the top of her head in her hand—firmly, though not harshly—and forcing her to look up. North’s eyes took a moment to come into focus. “What?”

With exactly the right amount of fraying patience, enough that Alenko wondered in that moment why Nguyen had been overlooked for OCS, she asked, “What’s wrong with the targeting matrix?”

It had the intended effect. North’s mouth moved without interference from her paralytic fear. “The IFF protocols are seven kinds of upside-down. Even if we weeded out the sabotage, it’d be rough.”

Samantha came out of her own daze, just a little. “IFF protocols are less consistent in the Terminus. There’s a genetic algorithm the system uses to teach itself during initialization, but between the comm blackouts and scatter in the inputs, we haven’t made much progress. It just doesn’t want to calibrate.”

Alenko glanced between them both. “How long will it take, once we restore communications?”

“Assuming no data corruption from the last shut-down?” She thought, chewing her lip, looking more like her father than she ever knew. “Thirty or forty minutes at a minimum.”

He rubbed his forehead. “They’re not going to give us that much time.”

Lilith folded her arms, frowning. “You say they’re Collectors.”

It sounded like she’d been turning this thought over for some time. He answered carefully. “I know they are. I’ve seen them before.”

“Where?” Her eyes narrowed. “We moved to the colonies when I was five years old. There have always been rumors about Collectors. Like void ghosts, or moon plague.”

Nguyen studied her, just a moment too long to be entirely comfortable. “I’ve seen them, too. He’s telling the truth.”

Samantha drummed her fingers against her thigh, nervous, thoughtful. “They look like insects. With that dull gold carapace and those flimsy wings.”

Lilith snorted. “Maybe they are, and maybe nobody in this car knows what the hell they’re talking about.”

Marlon snorted and steered the truck onto the rough country road that led to the GARDIAN site. “Look around you, Lilith. You think these things condensed out of thin air?”

“The Alliance offered us this equipment. And they apparently knew—”

“We didn’t know.” Alenko twisted in his seat so he could look at her directly. “Collectors are interested in unusual genetic material, for bio research. Nobody could have guessed they had the means or the will to act on this scale.”

Lilith gave him a look of pure ice. “You’re curiously well-informed.”
“We’ve been trying to figure them out, indirectly.” Alenko took a breath. Outside, the forest line bounced by to the erratic rhythm of Marlon’s truck. “Tracking down a human terrorist organization known as Cerberus. They’ve had dealings with the Collectors before.”

Nguyen’s gaze shifted to him. Judging the disclosure. He was vividly reminded of Ash.

Lilith had paled. “You think this Cerberus might be involved. Our own people? Humans?”

“I don’t know. But they set up Akuze. And kept people like rats in their labs. Killed a more than a few of them.”

Samantha frowned. “That old colony that got eaten by thresher maws? I thought that was an accident.”

Marlon guided them through a turn. “You served with Shepard, so I guess you’d have an inside track.”

Two puzzled stares fixed themselves on Marlon. Alenko groaned, privately. The driver answered. “He served on the Normandy in the war.”

Now the stares turned to him. Nguyen harrumphed and returned to attending North. Samantha’s eyebrows were in her hair, as if she couldn’t decide whether to be astonished or offended. “What is special operations doing on Horizon?”

“I’m not spec ops.” He looked at their disbelieving faces, and tried again. “I’m just your standard marine.”

They weren’t buying it. Alenko wondered if this was what Shepard had felt like all the time, this sort of rank suspicion mixed with a grudging pinch of admiration. He didn’t care for it, not at all. He never wanted to be singled out.

They sat in that unpleasant silence, scanning the windows for any sign of swarms or Collectors, for the better part of thirty minutes, turning up the road carved through the forest and leading towards the warehouses and ultimately the GARDIAN site. But every patrol they passed had already been disabled—dissolved away, the only sign anything had been there at all dropped weapons, ash outlines mixed with the mud, and the odd cybernetic implant that proved more durable than the Collectors themselves, not much different from the one he found at the Nephilim lab.

Someone was fighting back. And after Alenko saw some of those scant remains lodged in the lower canopy of the forest, he was convinced that whoever passed here earlier included biotics. It wasn’t a common ability anywhere, and they hadn’t seen anything resembling an organized force since the Collectors arrived.

He understood his mission; he just never expected playing bait to result in a full-scale invasion, if that was even the cause. Though he kept his small team focused on doing what they could, their odds of survival were extremely low. Say they got communications back up, maybe even stretch their luck to getting the cannon online. There was still an overwhelming force on the ground and no help in sight. Unless… unless… that was what those decimated patrols meant. That someone else was here, fighting back.

It felt fragile. Too much like hope.

He couldn’t think about it now. Dwelling on it would only lead to second-guessing the decisions he could control.
Shepard’s team was near the market when they found the first body.

The man lay outside a convenience store, fallen like a statue beside the door. His head frozen looking over his shoulder and an expression of alarmed surprise fixed on his face. But worst were his eyes, darting back and forth, panicked. Rain dripped down his face.

“Stasis field.” Mordin sounded satisfied, though not at all pleased. Glad his assumption regarding the seeker swarms was correct. Unhappy to see it confirmed like this.

Shepard felt ill. She squatted beside the man. Saw his gaze fix on her, filled with hope. “There’s nothing we can do.”

It wasn’t a question, but Mordin answered as though it were. “Lack necessary equipment. Would take hours even if we did. Faster to let it wear off.”

The man by the store looked nothing like Kaidan, but it was only too easy to imagine him on the ground, trapped like this, waiting for the Collectors to load him into a coffin-sized pod and cart him off to their ship. He would have been near the GARDIAN cannon. And she knew damn well he wouldn’t run from the fight.

“Why here?” she asked, aloud, unconsciously swiping at her soaking hair, refocusing on the mission. “Wouldn’t they have started in the most heavily populated areas?”

Garrus frowned at the abrupt shift in topic. “Makes sense to sweep out from the ship. Here, they started at the outskirts of the suburb and worked their way in. Circling the center and keeping people trapped. I’ll bet they did it in multiple staging areas throughout the colony, simultaneously.”

“And they would’ve cleared the GARDIAN site, too.”

“Yeah.” His mandible hugged his face. His bandage was a sodden mess. “Shepard, what—”

Her attention turned back to the stricken colonist. “Blink if you can hear me.”

Blink.

“We’re here to help. Once the invasion is routed, the stasis effect will wear off. Try to stay calm.”

Another blink, slower this time.

She touched his hand, briefly, then rose. “If there are still people here, then there’ll be Collectors too. Stay sharp.”

They found more victims as they moved up. More seeker wasps as well. Shepard moved quickly and quietly, her rifle ready.

Garrus kept pace, no less alert, but wasn’t inclined to silence. “So you want to tell us what this is really about?”

On her other side, Mordin’s attention shifted slightly, surprised. She didn’t pay either of them any mind.

Garrus was not deterred. “Every time we’ve checked a hab, you’ve had this look like you’re
dreading what you’ll find. Something you’re expecting.”

“It’s not mission-critical,” she answered, which was true enough.

“But I’m asking anyway.”

A glimmer of movement spared her any reply. She ducked behind a parked air car and peered over the hood.

Garrus and Mordin crouched beside her in the muddy grass, following automatically, but looking at her with an obvious question in their eyes. Shepard scanned ahead.

A number of Collectors fanned out over a plaza, loading people into sarcophaguses, overseeing their transfer to hovering platforms, and searching buildings for more paralyzed victims. Too far away to make out much detail. “Looks like about twelve.”

“Terrible odds,” Garrus said.

“We’ve faced worse.” She tilted her head. “Not much worse, but still.”

“I remember something about facing down a reaper… fighting off three separate merc armies… taking out Saren’s lab with a single salarian platoon… among others.”

She managed not to wince. Garrus had no way of knowing how close to home that hit, just now. “Let’s hope this doesn’t end like Virmire. We could try going around.”

Mordin shook his head. “Unlikely buildings are clear. Easy to become trapped.”

“Well, we can’t take them out in the open.” That wasn’t entirely accurate. But she wasn’t taking them up the middle one-on-four, with no idea of the Collectors’ capabilities, unless she was out of other options.

Just then, she heard a whirring noise, louder than the swarms, louder than the tapping of the rain on the car’s canopy. Another pair of Collectors set down, folding four diaphanous wings not unlike dragonflies.

Garrus spoke for both of them. “They fly.”

“It would seem that they do.”

Mordin glanced at them. “Wings delicate. Fragile. Unlikely to risk unfurling them in combat.”

“Well, that’s something. On the other hand, if they do show themselves, they become target one.” Shepard took a quick look around the wider field. It didn’t help that there were hapless civilians everywhere. Paralyzed as they were, they couldn’t scatter when the bullets started flying. Or cry for help, or administer any kind of first aid, if they were struck. Some stasis fields protected their contents, but she wasn’t willing to test it. “We have to draw them away from the colonists.”

Garrus sized up their location, looking up at the habs. “Well… they can fly.”

It took her a second, and then she smiled, slowly. “And there’s one place the colonists aren’t.”

Mordin was a bit more dubious. “Elevation increases exposure. May draw more attention than we can handle.”

“Better than putting holes in civilians.” Shepard slipped back behind the car. “Let’s go.”
They slid around the back of the shopping complex, searching for a route to the roof. The hab modules were tall even by Shepard’s standards. A simple boost wasn’t going to do it. But they spotted a delivery truck parked right against the wall, and from there, it was a simple climb.

Shepard moved up slowly, keeping low to the roof. Garrus copied her motions, squinting through the downpour. “There.”

He pointed at several more brown forms flying down and alighting in the square just below their position. As they folded their wings and stood, Shepard took in their squat bodies, too broad at the shoulders and hips to ever be human, the three-fingered hands, the massive triangular heads and above all else the four glowing yellow eyes.

Garrus blinked. It was the first clear look they’d ever had at their enemy. “Those are Collectors?”

Shepard stared, dumbfounded. Vector’s vid captures were so grainy she hadn’t gotten a good look at them, going on Miranda and Cerberus’ word. Not that she’d seen one before, herself.

But she’d sure as hell seen creatures like these—in her nightmares, for six solid months, while the Prothean beacon’s vision tortured her mind.

The Collectors raised their heads, and their weapons.

Mordin hit a button on his scanner. The nearest Collector stood up straight and stiff, vibrating as though shocked. “Hostile intentions registered! Suggest we use violence!”

He ran for the cover of an air conditioning unit. Garrus grabbed Shepard by the arm and dragged her down onto her belly as the Collectors opened fire.

She turned her stare on him, still slack-jawed. “Garrus, they’re—”

“Shooting at us!” He shoved her gun towards her chest. “Snap out of it!”

She grumbled, but swung her rifle into position. It was hard to get a good angle. Shepard wriggled closer to the edge.

Mordin’s target lay motionless on the ground. She fired at a Collector behind it. It jumped sideways, as if it weighed nothing. A faint blue shimmer gave away its barrier.

She sighed. “They have biotics.”

“Because this wasn’t fun enough already,” Garrus grumbled.

One of the Collectors burst into flames. As it twitched and writhed, Shepard saw the fire originated from a spot on its back. Her brow furrowed.

A bullet whizzed by her cheek, close enough to stir her hair. She tracked it instantly and nailed the Collector with two quick shots.

Garrus fired steadily, switching targets at lightning speed, trying to keep them contained. It was the work of three men. So perhaps it was understandable that he didn’t notice the pair of Collectors that flit up over the edge of the roof, weapons aimed before their feet touched solid ground.

Shepard flung herself back to clear line-of-sight from the ground, and fired over Garrus, praying he wouldn’t take that moment to sit up. Her rifle shredded their wings. She expected some kind of
reaction— pain, rage— but they just kept firing back with mechanistic apathy.

Garrus turned his head. “What—”

“Stay down and keep shooting!” She sat up a little more, trying to give him more room, while not allowing the Collectors a moment to advance. They were better shots than she’d hoped. Her shield was close to giving out.

One Collector finally went down. The other rose into the air, jerking like its muscles danced on strings, red-gold light shining out of cracks in its thick skin, that gash of a mouth opening in silent horror. It hadn’t felt her bullets. But this was a pain beyond pain. Something not of this world.

Something she’d seen before, waking and sleeping.

Her mind couldn’t remember much of that final battle in the Presidium Tower, not with any clarity, thanks to being battered about the head one too many times over the preceding months. But her body did. And it raised her gun and began firing before the Collector finished rising.

It wasn’t enough. A blue shimmer gathered over its flesh and it floated gently to the ground, and looked her in the eyes. It spoke with a voice she heard in her head as much as with her ears. “This body does not matter.”

Then it began to walk towards her.

She continued firing.

It raised a hand, and in its three strong fingers, it clutched a swirling ball of blue darkness. “This is what you face.”

The sphere of dark energy rushed towards her. Her rifle clicked, overheated. She flung herself to the side. So instead of hitting her square on and leaving her dangling helpless, the singularity merely knocked her off the roof with a slap of its artificial gravitational field.

She tumbled down and hit the concrete sidewalk painfully hip-first. That stupid bag of thermal clips attached to her belt split and scattered, clips rolling every which way. She rolled over and drew her pistol. It screeched electronic noise at her, jammed from becoming the peanut butter in her pavement sandwich. Shepard snarled and threw it down.

It wasn’t far to fall. But she had a depleted shield, a dead thermal clip, and a half dozen Collectors swarming her location.

Shepard scrambled to her feet and ran blindly into the café behind her, bullets pinging painfully off her armor. She’d be black and blue at the end of this mission. Assuming she lived that long.

Her only thought was the restaurant had to have a rear exit, for deliveries at least. Chairs banged against her shins. She half-tripped over a customer lying frozen in the narrow aisle, skidded over a pile of dropped breakfast dishes, and slammed into the kitchen at a dead run.

And collided with the back wall.

Her palms ran over it, utterly disbelieving.

The clatter of plates shattering from the dining room told her at least one Collector followed her inside. And now she was trapped. Thinking with desperate speed, she scanned her surroundings. First lesson of spec ops was she always had everything she needed. She just had to be bright
enough to find it.

Meals sat abandoned on the stove. Pans hung from a ceiling rack. Spice jars on a magnetic strip, a double row. A burnt grapefruit in a bowl. Absolutely nothing that would be effective against a Collector. Not even a goddamn knife in sight, and Shepard doubted very much her boot knife could slash Collector chitin.

Then she focused on the citrus. Not burnt. Torched. And this was a fucking backwater colony—no fancy gadgets here. She kicked aside a fallen sheet pan and smiled.

Then she drew herself up alongside the door, her prize clutched in her hands, and waited for the Collector to enter.

Which it did, only a second or two later, its rifle pointed forward, that meaty triangular head sweeping across the room. But even with four eyes, its peripheral vision left something to be desired.

Shepard raised the propane blowtorch, tip already starting to glow. The Collector caught the movement and swung its head towards her just as she twisted the valve. “Surprise, jackass.”

It took the flame full in the face and went up like a pile of matchsticks. Shepard stumbled back into the kitchen, half-gagging on the smoke.

It fell to its knees, and then onto its face, still burning. She kept a grip on the torch but it seemed to be alone. And the sound of gunfire from the plaza had faded. Hopefully good news.

As the fire exhausted its fuel, the Collector began to collapse into ash. Shepard frowned. Squatting beside it, she touched its cooling shoulder, gingerly. It crumbled into nothing. Soon all that remained was a vaguely Collector-shaped outline on the floor, and an oblong green implant with an oily sheen, half the length of her forearm.

Footsteps in the café. Her head jerked up, already raising the torch.

Garrus held up his hands. “Hey!”

She made an exhausted sound and dropped the propane. “What the fuck are they doing here?”

Mordin crowded in behind Garrus. “Expected to find Collectors. Didn’t we?”

“That’s not their only name.” She turned her attention back to the object left behind. “This was embedded his flesh. Back, I think.”


“Easy to overheat?” she hazarded, remembering the first burn victim.

Mordin smiled. “Precisely.”

Garrus peered at it. “That looks exactly like the one we found on Omega. Only we pulled it out of a Blue Suns shipment.”

“The Suns ship for a lot of people,” Shepard said. Thinking to herself that one of those clients was Cerberus, without really knowing why. Just a prickle in her gut. The Suns had a base on Sanctum, a colony world Cerberus apparently owned. And they also worked for the Collectors, who Cerberus ostensibly opposed. Something wasn’t adding up.
This implant glowed, in slowly fading lines running the length of it. She hovered her gloved hand over it and experienced a tingle, like a mild electric current. “Did they all have these?”

Mordin shook his head. “No. Maybe twenty-five percent.”

“The one on the roof?” She didn’t have to specify further.

Garrus cleared his throat. “Yes.”

They headed outside. More piles of ash and shards of bone greeted them. “Nice job cleaning up.”

Garrus wasn’t distracted. “What did you mean, that’s not their only name?”

“You know the vision the Prothean beacon gave me two years ago.” She began to collect her fallen stash of thermal clips, pausing only to replace the one in her rifle.

“So I know what Protheans look like.”

Garrus glanced from the piles of ash, then back to her. “No…”

She shrugged and started walking. Truth be told, she had no idea what to do with that information either.

He jogged a few steps to catch up. “How? Why?”

Mordin had his own thoughts. “Protheans a living species. Living species relatively impervious to fire. Not prone to rapid degradation upon expiration.”

That stopped her. “You’re right. They’re not identical. Stiffer, discolored, larger heads. More cybernetics. And the disintegration is bizarre.”

“If they’re Protheans, then the reapers have had fifty thousand years to mess with them.” Garrus sounded doubtful, all the same. “Plenty of time to become… this.”

It still didn’t sound quite right. Shepard shook her head. “Come on. We need to get to that turret.”

/

Samantha’s omni-tool beeped. “Here.”

Marlon turned the truck down a smaller side road. Alenko recognized shipping containers and the pre-fab warehouse where they’d been staging the various components for the defense cannon. “I thought the jamming tower was in the woods.”

“It is.” She glanced up at him. “We can access a direct route by going through the warehouse.”

Lilith nodded. “Faster than going around.”

“Ok.” He slid out the door as Marlon brought the truck around and came to a stop. This was as close as they got to the building. And the forest underbrush beyond would be impenetrable.

The ride was just long enough for this whole situation to start catching up to him— the too-early morning, the fighting and fleeing across the city, the horrible situation with Lewis Traynor and the
long climb down the elevator. Alenko felt worn through. And this wasn’t even close to over.

Apparently he wasn’t the only one. Lilith stretched, massaging her neck. Samantha huddled beside the truck, trying to shelter from the rain. It came down in a steady drizzle now, not as fierce as before. Still enough to leave everything soggy.

Nguyen, predictably, already had her rifle out, scanning for enemies. North stuck to her like a shadow.

Alenko looked from the sealed warehouse delivery bay to the perimeter fence, three meters high. “So, how do we get inside?”

“All of them turned towards the new voice. Alenko groaned. The mechanic, Delan, scowled at them from beneath the dripping brim of his ball cap. Delan had done nothing but shoot his mouth since Alenko’s team set foot on Horizon.

Nguyen took a step towards him. “You want to go again? I’m game.”

He spat. “Of course you survive. They got Egan and Sam and all the others but you—”

Lilith stepped around the truck, her hand raise, placating. “Delan, please.”

His face lit up. “Lilith! You’re alive!”

“Obviously.” She wasn’t upset, exactly. More like irritated. Alenko had no idea what was actually going on between them, but even if Lilith was madly in love— which hardly seemed the case— Delan had done nothing lately but cause her problems with her job. “Who else is here?”

He shook his head. “We were unloading the new cement mix. Those seeker things got all the rest of ‘em. They tried to get in a few times, but couldn’t breach the hatch. Guess they gave up and cleared out.”

Alenko glanced over his shoulder, towards the suburbs ringing Discovery. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

Samantha took a deep breath. “Is the rear exit still accessible?”

“Sure.” Delan blinked. “But there’s nothing out there but klick after klick of wild forest.”

“Wait.” Alenko turned fully around, peering past the shipping containers. “You hear that?”

Lilith had reached the end of her rope. “It’s just the damn rain.”

“Shhh.” He took a tentative step forward, and caught it again. The buzzing of wings. “Oh, crap.”

Marlon heard it, too. “Why would they come back?”

“They’ve got all the time in the world to clear this place out.” He drew his rifle, knowing it would be less than useless against the swarm. “Get inside. Now.”

Nobody there needed to be told twice. But it was fifty meters to the warehouse.

Alenko fired off several bursts, trying to get the swarm’s attention, but it was like shooting at the clouds. It descended on them utterly without prejudice. He let the others get a head start and then
turned and ran himself.

By rights, Delan should have led the pack, but he slowed to stay with Lilith. Instead it was Samantha, racing full-tilt towards the smaller hatch beside the large loading bay door. Marlon was close behind. Nguyen pushed North towards the building, and joined Alenko in attempting to draw off the swarm, firing erratically as they fled.

Then Lilith tripped over the sidewalk as she came off the grass. She went down to one knee and cried out.

Marlon turned at the sound, and that was enough. A wasp seized his arm and stung him. His face screwed up with anger and he ripped it out, flinging it to the dirt. And then froze in place, fingers still extended.

Alenko kept moving. The swarms were slow. Not a design flaw so much as no particular need for haste.

Delan attempted to pull Lilith to her feet. But she’d cracked something on the hard pavement. She limped one step and gave a little cry of pain. Delan tugged on her arm. “Come on!”

She hobbled onward. Delan continued to coax her, growing more worried with every passing second. He slipped his arm under her shoulders and all but carried her towards the warehouse.

So he didn’t see the wasp descend like an arrow and dig into Lilith’s back.

She arced and gasped. Tried to run. Fell to the ground, and froze, awkwardly, her mouth hanging open and her body twisted.

“Lilith!” Delan seized her waist and tried to drag her, upright or across the ground, Alenko couldn’t say.

Samantha disappeared inside the building and shut the hatch behind her. Smart. He hoped she had enough self-possession not to lock it.

Delan continued to try and haul Lilith with him to safety. Alenko drew level with him, and grabbed his arm. “We have to go.”

Delan tried to throw him off. “I won’t leave her!”

Nguyen drew up beside them, and fired again. “Let the idiot stay. We don’t have time for this.”

“Get to the warehouse.” Alenko tugged on Delan again, having no better idea why he was trying this hard to save this particular asshole. “No choice. When the swarm passes, someone’s got to be here to drag her inside. Keep her from the Collectors.”

Either that made sense or Delan’s rage had overtaken his altruism, but he let go and let Alenko pull him back. The hatch slid open. He all but threw Delan inside before following, slapped the pad three or four times with his palm until it finally shut, and then hit the locking mechanism.

Silence descended on the warehouse. North gulped. Nguyen padded into the dark, checking their perimeter. The only noise was Samantha, close but not quite hyperventilating, Delan trying to hide his raw despair, and Alenko, whose heart was beating so fast he was shocked nobody else could hear it.

Delan shoved him, hard enough to send him sprawling into the wall. “This is your fault!”
Samantha took a shaky breath. “Just wait a minute—”

Alenko shoved him back. “Yeah, I called the Collectors right after I got here. Come on down, colony’s ripe for picking.”

The mechanic took a step forward, his finger wagging in Alenko’s face. “You—”

Samantha stepped between them. “This isn’t anyone’s fault.” She looked at Alenko. “Maybe the Alliance attracted their attention, but sitting defenseless wasn’t any better. This is just plain rotten luck.”

Delan wasn’t distracted. “You left Lilith stranded out there, waiting for those things to come collect her. You Alliance are supposed to be so brave. Such great defenders. But when it comes down to it, you just save yourselves.”

Something Nathaly had said came back to him then, her voice floating through his ears like she was standing beside him. *The truth about Akuze is I’m alive and they’re dead because I was smart instead of loyal. I ran. That’s what I have to live with.*

Samantha peered at him. Even Delan looked confused. He’d been staring into space for slightly too long.

Samantha reached for him, tentatively. “Commander Alenko, I’m sure he didn’t—”


She returned to the group. “Sir.”

“We’re running out of time. I’m going to take Traynor and head to the jamming tower. I need you to take North and head to the GARDIAN site.”

Nguyen was doubtful. “Both sites should be well-defended.”

“I’m betting the jamming tower isn’t. It had to be here before they landed, and it’s done its job.” He rubbed his forehead, not liking any of this. “I need someone standing ready as soon as it goes down. Hopefully the other techs have made it there by now.”

Traynor glanced between them. “And if they believe the turrets are inactive or disabled, there’s little reason to waste resources defending them.”

“I’m not counting on it.” But Nguyen was more excited than nervous. She hated this running and hiding business. “We’ll get it done.”

“And we have to get to the jamming tower.” Then, to Delan, “Where’s the back door?”

Shepard shot the last Collector blocking the end of the lane, and watched it dissolve into dust. “How many of these fucking things can there be?”

“It’s an entire cruiser,” Garrus answered, exasperated. “And are they behaving like typical soldiers to you? I doubt they care about living space.”

Shepard turned her eyes to the sky, grimly. “And with the swarms, it doesn’t have to be.”

Garrus opened his omni-tool. “We’ve reached the edge of the suburb. But if we can get a little further east of here, we should run into the start of the support complex for the spaceport. They had to bring the GARDIAN equipment through here.”

She peered ahead. “If we can climb through this set of habs, it should lead us east.”

Pre-fab habitats, modular as they were, stacked easily. Arrangements of stairs, ramps, and ladders connected them. They climbed up to a second story unit and walked through another apartment.

The paralyzed bodies had thinned out again. Lower population, a more recent sweep, or something else, Shepard couldn’t say. But it had her on edge. She was tired of roaming through empty homes, breakfast laid out, book bags sitting by the hatches. Tired of watching the swarm descend to land, wondering if this time Mordin’s protections would fail. And on top of that, ever since that first encounter in the market plaza, the Collectors had tracked them ruthlessly. Like they had big glowing targets painted on their backs.

Garrus wasn’t wrong. She was nervous, more than she should be, enough to distract her. If she’d waited these past six weeks for fear of not knowing what to say to Kaidan, and then she lost her chance entirely—

Shepard swallowed and pushed the ugly thought from her mind, before it could gain traction. She’d find him. She wouldn’t accept any other outcome.

They emerged at the top of a hill, at ground level. The hab modules were gone. In their place stood row after row of shipping containers. Pavement, too, for trucks and forklifts; throughout the suburb, it was all grass for aircars. Shepard consulted her own map. “This isn’t the spaceport.”

Garrus shook his head. “From the look of it, it’s just a holding area.”

Mordin consulted his scanner. “No sign of stasis fields. Colonists already relocated to ships.”

“We must be getting closer,” she reasoned. “This is where they would’ve taken all the equipment they shipped in for the defense system.”

“Makes sense.” Garrus scanned the horizon. “So how do we get past here to the guns?”

“No sure.” She started to say more, but was interrupted by the buzzing of the swarm. “Shit.”

She’d always had superb hearing, above the standard marine genemod package. But now she didn’t know which way to move. The insectile noise of the Collectors’ wings seemed to come from every direction at once.

Mordin consulted his scanner. “Massive wave of inbound hostiles!”

Shepard swore again. In all this morning, they hadn’t seen one person fighting back. Small wonder the Collectors had chosen to track their movements. Briefly, she thought of her other two teams, out there on the road and in the woods, and hoped they fared better.

But there wasn’t any time for worry. Her eyes lit on a truck, parked in the middle of the road. “Maybe we can outrun them.”

Garrus caught on immediately. “Go. I’ll cover our rear.”
She moved up without arguing, Mordin following. A Collector landed in her path. She shot it, chitin flying, before it could draw its weapon. They didn’t seem to feel pain, much less fear. She had to completely disable each one to stop it.

But some of them were easier than others. Her target collapsed. She stepped through the cloud of ash, moving doggedly towards the truck.

Garrus let off several rounds. “They’ll be on us any minute.”

Shepard started to run.

The path to the truck was clear. She didn’t check her speed, but slammed full force into the door, fumbling at the handle. This was old equipment, rugged, built for hard use and not aesthetics. Everything was mechanical. Thank god, because as she slung herself up into the cab, it became obvious the vehicle had no power.

She thumbed the starter. Nothing happened. “Shit!”

Mordin turned and began to fire back at the Collectors. Shepard twisted and looked under the dash, near the accelerator. Saw the cut power line.

Confusion overcame her. It was obvious sabotage. Why the hell would the colonists—

And then it turned to horror. “Fuck!”

Garrus joined Mordin just in time to overhear. “What?”

“It’s an ambush. They drove us here.” Shepard turned her head wildly, sweeping the terrain, looking for any way out.

Mordin continued to fire, each shot meticulously placed. His pistol was higher-caliber than most. When it hit, it did some damage. And he ensured it hit. “Collectors will overwhelm our position in 40.8 seconds. Need exit strategy.”

Garrus was more blunt. “Shepard, they’re flanking us!”

She shimmied across the seats and went out the passenger side. The way ahead was still clear, dead-ending after about sixty paces at a large building. There was no guarantee they would be able to secure it, or for that matter, get inside. But she didn’t see any other options.

She ran around the truck and grabbed his arm. “This way!”

He followed on her heels, Mordin close behind. Another group of Collectors landed in their path. Shepard didn’t even slow down. Instead, she raised her rifle and fired as she ran, a steady stream of bullets pouring into her targets.

They fired back. Her shield held as she closed with them. Nothing was getting between her and that door.

The pair drew together and exchanged a glance as it became clear she had no intention of stopping. It was their undoing.

Shepard pulled her rifle up and slammed it two-handed into the shoulder of the first Collector. Something crunched. She pivoted and brought the gun down again, this time between the shoulder blades of the second. It stumbled forward.
Mordin caught up to her, his lips pressed together and his omni-tool extended. The first was just looking up when he delivered a massive electrical shock. It collapsed, twitching in the mud.

Shepard delivered another blow to her target. It fell on its face. Garrus slid to a halt and shot the back of its neck in one smooth motion. It lay still.

“This hurts you,” said that unearthly voice again, reverberating in her skull. And then Shepard went flying.

She was vaguely aware of Garrus calling her name. But the pounding of her head drowned out all sound, all feeling. Ripe to explode. The biotic energy of the attack skittered through her cybernetic nerves with the hiss of flame racing along a fuse.

The wall came out of nowhere and struck her like a hammer.

Shepard landed heavily at its base, all sprawling arms and legs, her mind still fuzzy from the last resonances of that voice. She thought, somewhat distantly, that even under Sovereign’s direct control, Saren hadn’t been able to do that.

Garrus yelled for her again. Somehow her rifle was still in her hand. She tried to raise it, her aim weaving erratically.

Brown shapes closed in on her team. She fired at one, missed. Fired again.

Then, somehow, they wriggled free of the trap. Garrus was hauling her to her feet, putting her back against the wall, screaming in her face. Pointing to the Collectors. “Mordin’s hacking through the door. We have to hold them off!”

That odd Collector, the one who spoke, glimmering with lines of red-gold light, continued its slow advance. Shepard singled it out. Managed to aim her weapon. “That one.”

She shot at it. A barrier bled away her bullets.

Garrus saw her intention, and joined her. Together they wore down its defenses. Chitin began to fly.

“Almost have it,” Mordin called out, frowning furiously at his omni-tool.

The Collector stretched out its hand. Energy began to gather.

Shepard shot it between its four eyes. Its head snapped back.

Immediately, her mind felt clearer, like a fog burned away by the sun. She became fully aware of just how many Collectors surrounded them. “Mordin!”

The hatch lock lit green. He tagged it open. “Clear!”

They rushed inside. Mordin had it closed so quickly Shepard nearly caught her heel on the hatch. Then he proceeded to seal it, muttering to himself. Something about improving the algorithm.

The orange light of his omni-tool was the room’s only illumination. Shepard’s breath was loud in her ears, every drop of water they shed onto the floor the volume of a bomb. She ventured a few steps into the black, boots squelching, and tried to ascertain their location.

Garrus gave his head a good shake, water flinging off his crest. Touched his bandaged gingerly. “Some kind of warehouse?”
“Looks like it.” She laid her hand against a crate. “We won’t be able to hold them off. We need to find another exit and keep moving.”

“Won’t they just follow us around the back?”

Mordin answered, shaking his head. “Collectors uncoordinated without presence of…”

He trailed off, unusual for him. Shepard thought she knew what he meant. “The odd Collector, with the biotics. The one that talks.”

“Talks?” Mordin cocked his head at her.

She looked from one of them to the other, uneasily. “You know. Morbid crap. ‘This hurts you.’” Dropping her voice on that last in imitation, or mockery, of the Collector unit.

Garrus frowned. “Shepard, none of them speak.”

“You couldn’t hear that?” At their head shakes, her mouth thinned. “Anyway, I think it works like Saren did. There’s a reaper behind this, or a reaper-delegate, taking control of Collector units through their implants. Just like Sovereign took over Saren’s corpse in the Presidium Tower garden, at the end of the Battle of the Citadel.”

“So there’ll be more of that kind.”

“Yeah.” She became aware they were still standing in the dark, and flicked on her rifle-mounted flashlight. It revealed Garrus and Mordin still soaked to the bone, hardsuits coated to the knee in a thick layer of sticky mud. She imagined she wasn’t any better off.

And that was just on the surface. Standing there now, in this brief respite, her body began to present its bill for the morning’s activities. Every inch of her felt bruised. Her armor might prevent her actually being shot, but the kick was still significant. In some places, like at her hip where she fell off a roof onto her own pistol, it felt like the damage went all the way into the bone.

Mordin had a bad scrape along his cheek from god-knew-what, and Garrus had managed to tear something open, because the bandage on his face seeped blue blood. They each looked as battered as she felt. Breathing a little harder than necessary, their eyes ever so slightly glazed.

But time was their enemy. She checked her weapon. “Let’s go.”

The warehouse was a warren of crates and pallets. Shepard fought back the feeling that an ambush was waiting behind every blocky shape leering up out of the darkness. Based on their tactics thus far, Collectors just weren’t that clever. They relied on numbers. Not stealth.

Until she heard a noise from behind a large wooden box.

Her gun flicked to it, bringing the light along. She saw a foot scuffle out of its circle. Raised her voice. “Come out. Slowly.”

A long pause. Then a man stepped into her light, blinking. He was dressed in stained coveralls, ball cap lodged on his head, his face pinched and worried. There was nothing in his hands.

Shepard relaxed, lowering her weapon. “Colonist.”

Her team likewise eased back. The man glanced at them, briefly, and then back at her. His eyes landed on her N7 insignia. Then he spat. “More Alliance. Just what we needed. And the name’s
Delan, not ‘colonist’. We have names, you know.”

“I’m not with the Alliance.” Glanced down at her suit. “Technically.”

Delan scoffed. “Should’ve figured there were more of you. Nobody just gives away a couple of high-tech defense towers. Gave the Alliance an excuse to get into our business, make us a target.”

Garrus was dubious. “You really think the Alliance sent you defenses so they could spy on you for a couple of weeks, and then sic the Collectors on you.”

That actually took him aback. “Wait… they really are Collectors? They’re… they’re real? Not just some Council propaganda to keep us in our place?”

Shepard didn’t have patience for his doubt. “Real, and waiting right outside these doors. Which is why I need you to tell me everything you know about those defense towers.”

“No.” His hand sliced the air. “Half the construction equipment in the colony’s been diverted for weeks building that thing. The generator alone—”

“Yeah, it’s a real shame the Alliance tried to keep you safe.” Shepard rolled her eyes. “Look—”

He took a step towards her, shaking his finger. “The Alliance caused this! Those swarms took Lilith, and Sten, and Sam, and—and all of them! My whole team. Nobody ever bothered us until you people showed up.”

She opened her mouth. But he ran right over her. “And don’t try to tell me you were just here to help. Horizon doesn’t need your help. We sure as hell don’t need highfalutin Alliance commanders like that Alenko character poking his nose in, stirring up trouble.”

Behind her, very quietly, Garrus said, “Oh, shit.”

She did her best to keep her voice even, to ignore the spike of fear and elation that came with confirmation that Kaidan was on Horizon. There was always an outside chance the Illusive Man made it up to compel her. “We need to get those guns online if we have any chance of driving out the Collectors. Or saving your friends.”

“Good luck.” It was clear he didn’t think much of their odds. “Alliance sent us a gun that won’t shoot straight. Typical.”

“By that, you mean…?”

“The targeting system’s never come online. Calibration matrix is fucked.”

Mordin spoke up. “Communications offline. Impossible to calibrate without comm network. Manual override, perhaps. Collector ship presents a large target.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Better and better.”

Garrus gestured with his rifle, speaking to Delan. “I don’t suppose there’s an emergency comm system anywhere we could boot up? Even something local would help.”

“Network’s down all over the colony from what I heard, including the emergencies.” Delan shrugged, nonplussed. As if he expected them to continue arguing rather than take action. “That Alenko came through here babbling about a jamming tower. Told him there’s nothing east of here but more forest. Suppose that’s your handiwork, too?”
Everything in her went still. She turned a laser focus onto Delan. “Kaidan was here? When?”

He backed up, raising his hands, unconsciously defensive in the face of her intensity. “Thirty, maybe forty minutes ago? Had more marines and some girl with him. Think she was a tech. Saved her, of course, and let the wasps have Lilith. What’s it matter to you?”

Garrus touched her arm. “If there is a jamming tower, and we take it out, we have a real chance of getting the GARDIAN system online.”

Mordin frowned. “EDI could fix targeting matrix. Simple problem, for AI.”

“There wasn’t any comm tower in the images we took during our approach.” But Shepard wasn’t confident. How closely had they looked at those images? Would they really have recognized a Collector jamming tower, if it was even visible from so far out?

“Kaidan thinks it’s there.” Garrus leaned on his name, just the slightest bit. A hint of accusation. “And he’s been here for weeks apparently. But you knew that already.”

Delan glanced between them. “What are you, his backup?”

Shepard ignored him. She wanted to agree with Garrus, wanted to head east, find Kaidan, make him safe. But every moment they wasted on that errand could cost thousands of colonist lives.

“We continue as planned,” she said at last. “We’ll have to clear the perimeter around the defense towers before we can bring them online. By then, hopefully we’ll have the comm network, and EDI.”

“Are you crazy?” Delan asked, his sense of empathy at last overcoming his indignation. “There’s hundreds of those things out there! Not to mention those bug swarms.”

“I know. We’ve been dealing with them all morning.” She turned to Mordin. “Can you set up an automatic ping so we’ll know the second we get comms?”

He nodded and opened his omni-tool. But said aloud, “Jamming tower sure to be guarded. Essential to Collector success.”

“Kaidan’ll get the tower down.” She managed to sound more confident than afraid, if only because what would become of Kaidan in the alternate scenario was too horrible to contemplate.

Delan stared at her in disbelief. “He had one rifle and a tech. He wasn’t even wearing armor.”

“The rifle isn’t his only weapon.” Shepard looked around. “What’s the best way to the defense cannons?”

Delan pointed them towards a hatch, watched them exit, and locked it securely behind them. She couldn’t find it in herself to blame him. She scanned their location. “Clear for now.”

She began to walk, but Garrus stepped in front of her. “Then we have a moment to talk.”

Shepard rubbed her neck, not meeting his eyes. They drilled into her anyway. “I get not mentioning Kaidan to the rest of the team. I doubt Miranda would understand, and most of the rest won’t care. But you should have told me.”

“Why?” she asked, her eyes flashing. “So you could question my every motive, like they do?”

He gave her a shove. “Because he’s my friend, too. Or have you forgotten that?”
A retort rose to her tongue, and died there. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just…”

Mordin interrupted, delicately. “Collectors aware of our position. Should keep moving.”

“Right.” Shepard looked questioningly at Garrus, who stepped aside. They began to walk north. This was clearly well past the residential areas. Instead, shipping crates, administrative buildings, power substations, and warehouses populated the landscape. At least there would be fewer paralyzed colonists. Maybe fewer seekers as well.

Impossible to keep her thoughts entirely on the terrain. Kaidan wasn’t frozen somewhere on the Collector ship. He was running around now, trying to stop this. Risking his life. It took everything she had to not turn and run for the woods, after him, back him up in any way she could.

“Who is Commander Alenko?” Mordin asked, after a few minutes.

Garrus answered. “An old friend.” His eyes shifted to her. “Maybe a little more Shepard’s friend, admittedly.”

She kept her attention on scouting ahead. But her anxiety must have continued to show on her face, because Mordin added, “A friend of Shepard’s must be capable. Sent to a likely target for abduction after all. Sure he will be fine.”

“We’ll know soon enough.” She took another breath. “Once he has the tower down, he’ll head straight for the guns. He knows there’s no point in looking for rescue. Nobody will get here in time.”

“Except us,” Garrus pointed out.

That actually made her smile. “Except us.”
The Sea and the Shore

August 2185

Alenko and Traynor crouched among the ferns, peering through the wet foliage into the clearing just ahead while the last remnants of the rain dripped from the leaves.

“That wasn’t there before,” she whispered, almost too low to make out the words. The jamming tower looked like nothing of this world. It drew the eye, and at the same time repulsed it, painful to look upon. They glimpsed it in glances. “Colonial government’s talked about expanding up here for years. It was always ruled too dangerous to the tourism industry.”

He glanced at her despite himself. “Tourism?”

“We’re near the breeding grounds of a large and particularly beautiful species of native butterfly.”

“Beats giant mosquitos, anyway.”

She didn’t seem convinced. “What you have to understand about the butterflies—”

He turned back to the Collectors. “I count four in view.”

“But there could be more. We can’t see the whole site, we’ve only watched ten minutes.” Slightly hysterical. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Yeah.” Completely honest. He wasn’t exactly eager to do this himself. “Except for all the other ones, where the Collectors win and abduct the entire colony.”

She shook her head, her mouth a painfully thin line. He shuffled closer and put his hand on her shoulder. “Specialist. Samantha.”

She looked at him. Bit her lip.

Alenko didn’t have Shepard’s gift for making people believe just by stating reality as she saw it. But he did his best to sound as confident and re-assuring as anyone could at fifteen decibels. “This is the hard part. Once we have comms, we have so many options for what to do next. We have to do this.”

“But that’s not even human technology!” Gesturing at the tower, with its strangely curving scaffold, yellow light etched into its lines.

“I’ve seen these. It’s... it’s just geth tech.” Not mentioning they later proved those structures were actually reaper designs, or how much that made his stomach shrivel up. “You’ve seen geth tech before.”

She took a shuddering breath. “I know. I’m— I’m not equipped for this. That’s all.”

“You’re doing fine. More than.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze, and let his hand dropped. Glanced again at the Collectors, then back at Traynor. “You circle around, just like we talked about. I’ll give you a count of one hundred and then start the attack. Stay on the lookout and shout a warning if you see any others. Then move again.”

“There’s four of them. Four.” She caught his sleeve. “Commander, this is—”
“My job,” he answered, slightly more harshly than necessary. Wishing that he’d kept his team together, knowing that taking down the tower would attract attention and maybe prevent him and Traynor from reaching the guns. He detached her. “Go.”

For a few seconds, he thought she’d continue arguing. Then she rose and slid off into the woods, keeping low.

He counted to one hundred, as much to distract himself from the waiting as anything else, staring at the squad of Collectors milling about the tower base, with a few lazy wasps circling overhead. What was he doing here? Taking on the Collectors alone was insane, even without reaper tech in the mix. He’d used up two lifetimes of luck just getting this far.

But what he told Traynor was true. There was no help for it. They had to disable this tower.

At a basic level, however alien, it had the same characteristics as any other broadband comm tower. The curving girders formed a lattice, crowned in a plethora of vertical spikes he assumed were antennae. Standard gear for reaper forces based on the jamming tower at Feros. He had no problem believing the Collectors could put it up in a few hours, tops. Honestly, he was immensely relieved they’d found this, and not something like Sovereign. Glad that the reapers apparently still saw a need for agents rather than taking direct action.

But something else was off about the tower, beyond the design. Something he couldn’t put his finger on. The lines were broken up somehow, near the apex, like something didn’t belong there.

His mental count reached a hundred. He took a deep breath, ran his tongue over his lips. Then he called up his barrier and ran out of the tree line.

He’d timed it perfectly. The nearest Collector patrolled the perimeter, passing within ten paces of his hiding spot just then. It barely had time to register him before his throw tossed it up into the canopy. Wood creaked and splintered. He’d given it every ounce of power he had, in hopes of disabling or even killing the patrol before the other three noticed.

It fell back into the underbrush with a brittle crack and didn’t rise. It also didn’t dissolve.

Two Collectors near the base of the tower, forty paces, center of the clearing. Concentrating on the equipment. They hadn’t seen or heard him yet.

He made the split second decision to leave the fallen Collector rather than risk the report of his rifle to kill it, and charged the tower, mud flying with every step.

Halfway there, they finally heard him. But by then they were also inside his range.

Without breaking stride, he flung his hand towards the one of the right, freezing it in a stasis field. Remembering all the people they’d passed that day, stung by wasps, caught in the same trap. It had a certain satisfaction.

The one on the left raised its weapon. Alenko redoubled his barrier strength.

He hated being shot at under a barrier. Bullets tended to ricochet off shields, due to the way they bled away the energy. A barrier stopped them. The first hit at supersonic velocity and immediately began to shed speed as heat. It felt like it would burn a hole through his chest.

Then another, on his forearm. And a third. They weren’t especially good shots. But then again, considering their strategy, they didn’t have to be.
He lifted the Collector into the air and let it hang there. Its next shot not only missed, but sent it spinning slowly, like a top.

The stasis field that held the first Collector powerless would also deflect any attack, not unlike a barrier in that regard. So he stood beneath the second and shot up at it, at just enough of an angle that any stray shots wouldn’t fall back on him. Alenko wasn’t sure he’d have the stomach to try this on any other target, except maybe the geth, but the Collector’s reaction was barely alive. It twitched involuntarily as the bullets struck it, chitin raining down, trying to find a firing angle on Alenko.

But not a single shriek or groan of pain. Not a trace of blood. It was damned odd.

Then Alenko hit something vital, or the cumulative damage was finally enough to disable it. It froze a moment, tumbling in midair, and then the ash began to blow away on the wind.

No time to think about it. He pivoted and dismissed the stasis field in one movement. He couldn’t have held it much longer, anyway, not and keep his barrier.

His finger clamped down on the trigger. Nothing and nobody came out of stasis without a moment of confusion. He could prolong that with his attack.

But much to his shock, the Collector immediately spun and raised its own weapon, firing as it charged. Alenko fell back, stumbling a bit on the terrain, trying to keep up his own assault. He reached automatically for a grenade that wasn’t there.

His rifle slowed. The thermal clip was giving out.

A bullet struck his shoulder. His barrier wavered, and for the barest moment he couldn’t hold it. Alenko was out of energy— which meant out of time.

The tower was directly overhead now. He dropped the gun, leapt at a girder and swung himself towards the Collector, the metal tearing at his palms, and let go as his feet connected. They went down together in a heap.

These Collectors used the same odd guns as the ones he’d met before. But as uncomfortable as they were to hold, with that warm, skin-like covering, they had heft. He pulled this one out of its owners grip and started bashing it into its face. All four eyes rolled up into its head. Then Alenko fell fourteen centimeters as the narrow waist dissolved out from under him.

He let go of the gun, loathe to touch it any longer than necessary. Pants coated in Collector ash, he crawled back to his own rifle, fingers clumsy as he swapped the thermal clip. He was nearly out. His head pounded, periphery vision starting to pulse with a nascent migraine. He had definitely overdone it and then some.

A blur of motion sent a fresh surge of adrenaline pumping through his veins. The fourth and final Collector, the second on patrol, staggered towards him. He fired on autopilot, his entire world narrowing to that one target, this one goal. The gun beeped a warning and went dead.

“Shit.” He scraped the scraped the bottom of his energy reserves, glanced at the terrain, and threw the Collector with the very last of his strength. It connected with a boulder with an audible crack, and puffed into ash before it hit the ground, dropping only an implant and its gun.

Alenko swayed in place. His rifle dangled limply at his side. He hadn’t pulled out all the stops like that in… well, ever, probably. He could sleep for days. Probably eat his weight in cheeseburgers, too.
Then he heard a shrill cry. “Commander! Incoming!”

Traynor. His head whipped towards the sound. In his weariness, he’d missed one patrol. Five Collectors, not four.

The final Collector was inbound. He tried to summon a barrier. It fizzled and died before it was even fully raised. Alenko staggered to his knees, seizing one of the fallen Collector weapons, and tried to take aim.

But a weight struck his shoulder from behind. A second later, pain shot through it, like a knife. Like a puncture. The stasis field wrapped his body in a vise. The wasp wriggled to pop its stinger loose—more agony—and flitted off, leaving him frozen.

Ahead, the Collector barreled towards him. A hundred paces off, no more.

He had to get the hell out of stasis.

It was just a mass effect field. Like any other field in physics, it obeyed fundamental and relatively simple laws, including those governing destructive interference. He knew if he hit on the right harmonic he could erode it into nothing. And luckily, convenient as mnemonic gestures were, movement was not actually required for him to use his own nervous system to generate a counter-field.

He closed his eyes—one of the few small motions left to him—pushed the pain of his shoulder and his own rising panic out of his mind, and started testing the stasis field with the sludgy remains of his energy. Trying not to think of the colonists depending on him to survive this. Traynor stuck in the woods. North and Nguyen and the rest of his command fighting off god-knew-what by the turrets.

It was slow work. Too slow. He opened his eyes. Thirty paces now. Twenty-five.

It occurred to him then that Alliance naval training for biotics might be a little light on countering other biotics. They tended to focus on creating tactical advantages or defenses for their assigned units. If he made it out of this alive, he’d definitely have to submit a suggestion.

The Collector reached him before he could find the correct countermeasure, raised its rifle, and fired pointblank into his chest. Alenko experienced a peculiar rending of his insides that came from flinching without being able to move. But nothing happened. The stasis protected him. The Collector made a noise, and pushed him over.

The sky reeled as Alenko fell statue-still with a thunk of pain. He watched the Collector’s feet as it circled him. It didn’t matter now if he did find a way to defeat the stasis; he was dead as soon as it went down. But if he didn’t, he’d get packed onto the ship with the rest of the colonists. Every last one of them, given the tower was still up.

He stared across the grass, and tried to see a way out, a dazed plea for answers.

Instead, he saw a figure break through the tree line.

Shit. All he could do was redouble his efforts to break free.

The Collector spied Traynor when she was halfway to the tower. It fired upon her, and she screamed and ducked her head, covering it with her hands, but kept running. Stupid, stupid. Best case now he was going to watch her die. Unless he could just be a little faster. A little smarter.
Traynor held something in her hand.

As she passed into the tower’s shadow, the Collector scored a hit—a series of those razor bullets spurting into her thigh. At the same moment, just before she collapsed, she threw a stone up in the air. Up into a mass of dark shapes hanging from the girders.

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“At least the rain’s dying down,” Garrus said, hauling her up over a retaining wall. This part of Horizon consisted of gentle rolling hills. No issue for the trees, but to lay out their pre-fab modules, the colonists built terracing.

“Because dried mud is so much better.” Shepard meant it as a joke, but from the pause and the look Garrus gave her, it fell flat. They still didn’t have comms. She didn’t know where the jamming signal originated, but it was somewhere Kaidan thought was in close enough walking distance to the warehouse to make a difference.

As if reading her mind, Garrus said, quietly, “Horizon has some of the densest forest I’ve ever seen. It takes time to get through that.”

Mordin appeared at the retaining wall. They gave him a hand, and waited for him to consult their maps again. The storage complex was a maze. It felt like they had to turn around twice to make any forward progress.

This was not helped by the abundance of Collectors. Though her team avoided being caught in a trap again, they were hounded at every opportunity. The response was out of all proportion to the threat they represented. Even if they made it to the defense towers, they had a snowball’s chance in hell of actually making this plan come together.

Unless the Collectors knew something they didn’t.

Mordin looked up. “Head northwest through administrative post. Building should back up to road. From there, short walk to defense towers.”

“Finally.” Shepard was beyond ready to be at the end of this day. One way or another, the last stand would be at the guns. “The road has to be easier than this. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and meet Miranda’s team there.”

Garrus shrugged. “I wouldn’t count on it. The whole reason we made two of our teams avoid the road is the Collectors were sure to use it to ferry colonists to their ship.”

Mordin shook his head. “Shepard correct. Collectors… fixating on us. Either other teams attracted same attention, or met less resistance.”

They made it to the admin building, through the office, climbed down the back, and dropped down to the main road, with no sign of the other squad. Shepard was surprised not a single Collector was waiting to meet them. “Keep sharp. Cover from the forest makes for a great ambush.”

They proceeded slowly, weapons raised as they scanned the terrain ahead. But as the first minute turned into five, and then fifteen, Shepard realized it wasn’t going to happen. “They aren’t trying to stop us anymore.”

Garrus let out a long sigh as he got it. “They’re regrouping at the defense towers.”

Mordin’s mouth thinned. He raised his eyes. “Clearing ahead. High probability that we have
reached the GARDIAN site.”

Shepard checked her shield and her thermal clip. Blew out a breath. “Now or never.”

“We could come through the trees, scout it out,” Garrus suggested, half-heartedly.

She shook her head. “No. We’ve wasted enough time trying to be clever. And unless they’re complete idiots they’ll have heat sensors watching the tree line this close to their ship, and we’ll wind up trapped in underbrush. We go up the center and hope for the best.”

The road dead-ended in a wide field ringed by more prefabs. Tread marks in the half-grown grass suggested the south end was used as a parking lot. Several staging platforms scattered throughout the site held yet more shipping crates, as well as the cradles used to hold the various components of the GARDIAN system in transit. Some were longer than a shuttle.

Straight ahead were the defense towers themselves. Three of them, each mounted with a high-caliber laser cannon capable of taking out ships from orbit. At their base, on a broad concrete platform, stood five Collectors gathered around a weather-proof console. Probably trying to disable it. She felt a surge of petty pride for Alliance technology.

But five wasn’t much of a welcome party. She spoke in an undertone. “This can’t be all there is. Move up quietly, and keep sharp for more in the buildings, or dropping from the air.”

They scuttled forward, trying to avoid attracting attention until they were in place. Then Shepard gave the signal and they opened fire.

The first shots took the Collectors by surprise. Her team had a lot of practice by now, and two went down hard in the opening round. The remaining three took shelter behind the towers themselves. After another few rounds got her nothing but a shower of concrete splinters, she shook her head. “Hold here. I’m circling around to drive them out.”

“I’ll cover you,” Garrus said, without looking away from his target.

She waited a few seconds, until he had their full attention, and then ran across the field and up a ramp into one of the prefabs. From the secondary hatch she had an almost unobstructed view to two of the three. It felt good to see them crumble into ash and blow away.

Both of them dropped the strange implant they’d noticed before. She frowned at that. It seemed to be the only persistent part of their bodies, the only item they carried other than their weapons that didn’t decay immediately.

 Apparently the third did as well, because it staggered out of cover, engulfed in flames from Mordin overheating its implant. She shot it to hurry the process along. Then she jumped down from the prefab and headed for the console. Garrus and Mordin jogged to the platform.

She glanced over the controls and surrendered them immediately to Mordin. “We have to get it online as quickly as possible. No way that was their full force.”

Garrus glanced around, like that prime target between his shoulder blades itched just as badly. “How we doing on comms?”

“Nothing.” Mordin frowned as he tapped away at the console’s haptic keyboard, his three broad fingers dancing on the air. “Calibration execution wildly incorrect. Targeting matrix impossible to build. Alliance techs always this inept?”
“Not always.” Shepard bit her lip. “Can we get the gun up manually?”


Shepard shut her eyes, just a moment. God, but this was the longest day. “Garrus.”

“Right.” They took up station near Mordin, each scanning half the field, prepared to defend their laughably indefensible position. Hopefully, it would buy Mordin enough time to figure out the system.

A brown smudge tracked across the sky. Shepard followed it with her gun. “Two o’clock.”

He squinted. “What the hell?”

At first she thought it had to be a small ship. But as it drew closer, she saw spindly jointed legs trailing beneath the main body, and a triangular front piece that looked for all the world like a stretched Collector head.

Mordin shook his head. “Data corrupted. May take a while.”

She glanced back at him. “What?”

The ground shook. Garrus started firing. “Shepard!”

She whirled. The thing had landed on the field. The size of a large air car, and with the body of a deformed beetle, it raised four bright eyes like headlamps. Then raised its head further. Thick cybernetic cables like tendons flanked its maw.

Shepard stared in a kind of fascinated horror. Within the body sat a pile of groaning severed husk heads, jerking and swiveling, glowing with blue light. “Mordin—”

He continued making adjustments on the console.

The thing sat up on its legs. The eyes began to glow, too bright to look at. “Mordin!”

She grabbed him around the waist, his hands still flailing after the keys. “What—”

Then it let loose with a laser strike that blackened the concrete. She only just hauled them behind a tower as her shield evaporated at first contact. She looked around wildly, saw Garrus panting behind the next tower.

He pulled his rifle up to his chest, trying to catch his breath. “A particle beam? C’mon, that’s just not fair.”

“What the hell is that thing?”

He took a daring peek around the tower. “I don’t know, but it just took off again.”

Mordin stared straight ahead, off towards the ship. “Collectors inbound!”

She looked over her shoulder. At the very far end of the field, four Collectors were folding their wings. A host of husks preceded them, running straight towards her squad. “Calibration has to wait.”

“It can’t wait forever,” Garrus said, raising his rifle.
She shot a husk’s legs out from under it. “Well, let’s at least fight this shit while we figure out how the fuck we can defend an open platform with only three people.”

It was a hard scrabble in and around the platform, ducking among the turrets, trying to evade the Collectors at the far end of the field and the aerial assault behind them. Shepard spent more time running than shooting. But it was no use. Inevitably, seeking shelter, seeking to stay alive, their path spiraled further and further from the console.

“Dammit.” She leaned out from behind one of the empty equipment crates, firing over what felt like a million miles at a Collector approaching the gun controls. She’d been separated from Mordin. Garrus was across from her, behind another crate.

She watched him turn away from the fight. Towards the tree line. “Garrus!”

But he didn’t fire. She dropped the Collector and risked a glance. Hidden in the bushes were two women in mud-caked Alliance navy utilities.

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Traynor lay still on the trampled grass beneath the tower, curled on her side, her injured leg drawn up to her chest. The Collector moved off Alenko and stalked towards her at a lazy pace that said it knew it had won.

Her stone arced up into the tower. Alenko traced it with his eyes. Confused. Baffled, really. But he couldn’t help holding his breath with hope. A series of large, shadowed shapes hung from the girders, the oddness he’d spotted before. They looked almost like… wings.

Her stone disappeared into that mass of brooding darkness. An angry stir rippled through the shadows, a rustling strong enough to roust a breeze where he lay below. Then the top of the tower exploded. A storm of butterflies, dropping their fine feathers like glittering ash as they surged towards the ground, stirring up as much dust as a shuttle landing. They engulfed the Collector.

It slid sideways towards the ground, not even enough time to raise its rifle. Alenko thought he saw movement there, a flash of gold-brown chitin, but he couldn’t be sure. And nothing could block out the noises.

A fresh wave of alarm rolled through him. There was no seeing Traynor through that mess, and there was no telling what was happening to her. He resumed his efforts to break free with new urgency.

At last, with a feeling like a soap bubble popping, the stasis field collapsed. Every joint complained as he tried to stand, but his last drop of energy was spent. He dragged himself forward, shoulder smarting. Butterfly down in a riot of colors carpeted the grass.

An uneven thudding of footsteps. He looked up. Samantha hobbled towards him, blood coating her jeans. He couldn’t do more than stare as she levered herself down beside him with a groan of pain, looking him over. “Commander?”

He rolled onto his back. She reached for his shoulder, concerned, and he managed to summon the energy to swat her away. “I’m fine. Just exhausted.”

“This seems a bit more than exhausted.”

“What’re those?” He gestured at the fallen Collector, still swamped by beating wings, iridescent blue and green.
“I did tell you there were butterflies,” she chided.

“I thought Horizon lacked large predators.”

“They eat insects. And our insects are huge.” She pursed her lips. “I guessed that with those hard exoskeletons, they might confuse the Collectors for a rather tasty beetle.”

A few of the creatures flew off. He saw the Collector’s chest, riddled with holes, and a saw-toothed proboscis extending from another butterfly’s mouth. “Good guess.”

Alenko shut his eyes a long moment, and then forced himself to sit up. His shoulder was killing him, almost as much as his head, and that was saying something given how much biotic firepower he’d put out today. “Your leg.”

“It shot me.” Traynor took a shaky breath, with more than a touch of bravado. She paled every time she so much as glanced at the wound.

“Let’s have a look.” Together, they got it straightened out in front of her, Traynor looking away and blinking tears out of her eyes. Alenko was certain not all of it was from the pain. “You’re doing great. We just need to get this patched up and take the tower offline.”

“There’s still the gun.”

“Let me worry about the gun.” He inspected the injury matter-of-factly. Blood seeped from it in a dark steady stream. Borderline. It might clot on its own, or it might not. “It’s a clean entry, no exit. But it’s still bleeding. There should be medi-gel at the construction site.”

“I’m going with you.” Then, as he started to speak, she said more firmly, “You don’t know anything about our defense grid. You need my help.”

He held her gaze for several seconds, and capitulated. It wasn’t like she was wrong, and clearly, she wasn’t about to give up after all this. And neither of them should linger near possible reaper tech. But if she was going, they needed to be cautious. “Fine. You’re going to tear it up getting there, maybe tear into something important. So, I think you need a tourniquet until we have access to real medical supplies.”

“Will my belt work?”

“It should do the job.” He watched her remove it. “I got shot through my thigh a few years ago. I should warn you, this is going to hurt like hell, but bleeding out is marginally worse.”

“The geth did have alarmingly good aim. We extracted several of their targeting protocols and sent them along for further development.”

“It wasn’t a geth, actually.” He started to rip at her jeans, using the bullet tears as a starting point, to get a good contact surface. “Hope you weren’t too attached to these pants.”

“This is the pettiest thing I’ve ever said, but god, they were broken in perfectly.” She sighed. “If not the geth, then who?”

“Saren, if you can believe that.” He slid the belt under her leg and threaded it through the buckle.

“I’m… not certain I do believe that.” She paused, but no further information was forthcoming. “Incidentally, there’s no such thing as ‘a geth’. They’re assemblages of thousands of programs, operating in a coordinated fashion within a discrete piece of hardware.”
He made another adjustment, so he’d have room to cinch it closed without the buckle vanishing under her leg. Once it tightened, there would be no rotating it. Then he made a small hole where he estimated the buckle would go through.

She carried on. Maybe she found it distracting. “They get smarter in proximity to each other as well. That’s why they prefer deploying in such large numbers. Ow!”

“It’s going to get worse. I’m sorry.” There was absolutely no way to be gentle. All that was left was to do it fast.

“Ow. Ow ow owowow—” Her voice went up the scale, trying not to be loud, unable to complete suppress it.

“Done.” He tucked the loose end away, and watched the bleeding begin to subside.

She made a kind of half-sobbing sound, massaging her leg just above the tourniquet. “This is awful.”

“I did warn you.”

Traynor gave him an annoyed glance. “I suppose the getting shot bit was true enough.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You feel up for taking down this tower?”

“Help me up.” They levered her to her feet and limped towards the console. The butterflies, still engaged with their meal, took no notice of them.

She leaned against it, inspecting the controls. “You should rest up while you can.”

Alenko slid to the ground, propped up against one of the tower’s legs. “Fine by me.”

Even that didn’t shut out what was happening to the Collector. He could hear them eating. And since there was still something to eat, they hadn’t killed it yet. Or whatever happened to Collectors. It didn’t seem to be struggling much anymore.

After a few minutes, Traynor spoke. “I knew you were a biotic. Saw the scar.”

He cracked his eyes open. She was staring furiously at the tower controls. “And?”

“I’ve known a few other biotics. Occupational hazard. The most advanced neural nets are based off your nervous systems.”

“Really.” That was news to him. He’d been out of college a long time. Hard to know how to feel about it, but he didn’t like the implication, that biotics were quasi-human at best, well-suited for experimentation. Traynor was a nice person. Probably she didn’t realize what she was saying, as if intent had ever made it any easier to hear.

She went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “I’ve never seen anything like that. You say you’re not special operations? That you weren’t here to— to—”

“I’m not.” He got to his feet, every muscle protesting. Missing Nathaly, an unexpected, throbbing stab of fresh grief, because this was the point he needed to pull on the mask, perform the right expressions to convince Traynor he was still a person no matter what she saw just now, no matter that he barely had the energy to stand. Nathaly never made him do any of that. “And I was perfectly honest with you about my reasons for being assigned to this mission.”
“It can’t be that simple,” she burst out, as if this was something she’d been holding back for hours. “Your work has to be related to what’s happened to my home. It can’t just be random chance.”

His vision flashed as he stumbled forward. He fumbled for his pocket, his hand closing around the pill bottle with a wave of relief, that it hadn’t fallen out somewhere. Alenko shook out twice his usual dose and slammed it back without water, the pills painful as they moved down his dry throat. Swallowed again, helping them along with the little spit in his mouth. Tried to summon a reply.

He almost said you sound like Delan, but only just avoided those words actually leaving his mouth. “We were unlucky. The Collectors took the bait, and we’re paying for it. But now we know. This will help protect all the other colonies out here.”

“How?” Traynor didn’t have a natural tendency to bitterness, but it was undisguised in her tone. “We both know installing the GARDIAN system was the most the Alliance will ever be prepared to do out here.”

Alenko couldn’t argue. “At least people will know what they’re facing. Maybe someone will figure something out. We can’t give up.”

“Who’s giving up?” She looked up then, just for a moment, her face soaked though the drizzle had subsided. She’d been crying silently over the console.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It wasn’t my fault, but nobody should have to go through this.”

“You’re just so calm.”

“It’s unfortunate side effect of my job that I see people on the worst day of their life way more often than is reasonable.”

Traynor actually chuckled, swiping at her eyes. “I suppose so. It’s a new one for me.”

Alenko shut his eyes, pushing away at the pain in his head, and then came around to look over her shoulder. Swaying only a little as he walked. “How are we doing disabling this jamming signal?”

“Their code is very strange. It’s taking a bit to work through it.” She pursed her lips. “I guess we should just be glad it’s not in an alien language.”

“I’m not.” She typed another command, and frowned the result. “It means we have a mole. Someone who lived here helped them do this.”

His mind immediately went to Messner. But he had no real reason to suspect him, aside from attempting to steal everything he could about the GARDIAN system design, and not liking him very much. That was ordinary weasel. This was on a whole other level.

Then the whole tower shuddered with a single deep bass note. He couldn’t say whether he heard it, or if just seemed like the sort noise that motion would make. Traynor looked up the length of the tower with profound satisfaction. “That’s done it.”

Alenko opened his omni-tool. All of its usual connections— extranet, file storage, Alliance internal networks— showed green. Suddenly he didn’t feel quite so alone. Like they had a real chance.

His eyes cut to her. “Can you disable the controls?”
“Absolutely.”

“Good.” He took a breath. “Then call everyone you can think of. The more people hear a mayday, the less likely the Collectors get away with this.”

Traynor nodded. “And then…?”

“And then we get our gun online.”

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Shepard stared at the two marines in the tree line. Then she caught motion out of the corner of her eye and skidded behind a platform, heels scrabbling at the ground. That laser strike was close enough that she could feel the heat all the way up her side. Too damn close.

“We’re losing ground.” Garrus got off two rounds before diving back into cover, as the thing swung its beam towards him.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” She leaned out and took her own shots. The stupid thing could turn on a dime, with all its heads wailing. The hellish chorus called up a barrier—as if they didn’t have enough problems.

Mordin had mostly stayed out of sight, trying to get any read on it, something they could exploit. “Electronics shielded. No functioning nervous system except cybernetics.”

Garrus still had the thing’s attention. She shot a glance back towards the trees. “Get out here and help us, damn it!”

Shepard’s command bellows were legendary for a reason. The women shot up almost like marionettes, their marine-trained hindbrains reacting to that tone without any interference from their conscious minds.

“Another wave!” Mordin turned away from his omni-tool and began firing at the Collectors. Shepard gave the two marines cover as they ran to her position.

Their leader—a tiny sergeant who barely reached above Shepard’s elbow with NGUYEN stitched on her uniform—gave her a quick once-over tinged with more than a little cynicism, noting her N7 insignia. “Just like Command to not fucking mention they had spec ops covering this mission.”

“We got here after the attack started.” Shepard watched the other marine, a taller woman with her black hair fallen out of its thick braid and formed a frizzy halo around her face. She shrank against the crate like she wanted to sink into it.

Nguyen spared her a suspicious glance as she fired on another Collector. “There’s been no comms in or out.”

Shepard finished it off. “We were in the area. We have to get that gun online. I assume that’s why you’re here?”

She took a quick breath and nodded. “The techs from Arcturus should be following behind, if they had the balls to leave the hotel, which between you and me…”

“Shit.” Shepard spied the flying unit turning about. “Garrus!”

He scrambled into a hab just as the laser lanced down again. Shepard shot at the unit, but it
seemed to shrug off any attack they could put together. It flew off. Garrus began picking his way back towards her.

Nguyen spoke as she continued to drive back the Collector wave. They were nearly defeated. “If we can keep the platform clear, North should be able to handle the gun.”

Garrus reached them at last. “What’s the plan?”

Shepard spared a glance at the other woman, North, who clutched her pistol to her chest in a death grip and still hadn’t moved a muscle. “You know the protocols?”

The girl was shaking like a leaf, but she managed the barest of nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Alright, you’re our tech now.” She looked at her team. “We punch through to the controls, and give her the cover she needs to get this done.”

Garrus checked his rifle. “I’ll draw off the flier. But I’ll need support.”

“You’ll get it.” She turned to Mordin. “You stick with them up the center.”

North bit her lip. She looked likely to wet her pants. “With respect, ma’am, it’s useless without comms. We can’t access the defense grid. I’ll have to calibrate the targeting matrix manually, which—”

“It’s a big ship. It’ll work.” Shepard jerked her chin at Sergeant Nguyen. “You good on clips?”

“I’m a little light.”

“Mordin.” Shepard was running low herself, after losing so many in the fall off the roof. The doctor retrieved a pouch of spares and tossed it to her. She handed it off to Nguyen, and checked her gear one last time. “Let’s go. If we get this done fast, reinforcements should be minimal.”

Shepard took a final breath, and then charged up the field, away from the turrets. Making her movements as flagrant as possible. She felt as much as heard the flier latch on to her position, the air rippling as it made a hairpin turn. Slamming herself behind a crane and feeling the equipment shake from the force of the laser.

Garrus landed a high-impact sniper shot on the thing’s flank. It let out a scream and turned away. “It’s working!”

She peered out from behind the crane, and saw North had reached the console and was typing furiously. But she saw something else as well. “Husks inbound to the guns!”

She tried to fire, but it was too far, and her own people blocked the way. Mordin’s pistol brought down two, but there were at least twelve. They would make the platform. It was inevitable.

Garrus dove back into cover, and it was her turn to play bait. Nothing she could do but watch as she ran, and hope like hell they’d get some kind of break.

The husks came wailing onto the field. North let out a scream and shrank behind the console, trying to disappear into the concrete column holding up the turret. Shepard saw it, cursed it. Didn’t even have the breath to yell an order, to try to break through her paralysis.

Then Nguyen started shouting, moving towards her as she fired. “North! Private North!”

“I can’t,” North wailed, her hands over her head. “I can’t, I can’t—”
Out of the corner of her eye, Shepard saw Nguyen plant herself dead center on the platform. It was a completely indefensible position. She’d be a sitting duck. “Private North, you are going to stand up and program that console.”

North was nearing hyperventilation. “They came through the walls—”

“They did.” Nguyen was nearly there, firing regularly, hitting more than she missed but still at great risk of being overrun. “They got you that time. This time, you get them.”

Shepard divided her attention, keeping them off the pair of them as best she could, and trying to keep the flier occupied. But North really was their only chance of getting the turrets online quickly. And the Collectors wouldn’t stop coming until that happened. That was the whole ballgame.

Nguyen arrived at North’s side, shooting still, at anything that approached the platform. “On your feet.”

North shook her head. Nguyen fired again, and again. A husk fell dead inches before it would have grabbed her. “This isn’t easy. I get it. But these husks are going to take Horizon just like they took Ninhursag if you don’t get off your ass and root out what Cerberus did to our targeting code. You are the only person who can save this colony.”

“Oh.” North was shaky, but started to rise. “Ok. I—” And then she screamed again, as a husk rounded the turret and grabbed at her shirt.

Nguyen shot off its head. “Fuck it! I’m going to stay right here. None of them will get you. I’m going to protect you. But you have to do this, North, you fucking have to. Be the person you mom needed.”

A look of determination came over her. She stepped up to the terminal and started to type. “My script’s running!”

Nguyen’s gun clicked overheated. She bashed it into a husk’s chest, knocking it down, and stomped hard on its skull. Then she went out of sight as Shepard ducked into a hab, the flier screaming its frustration as it veered off. Across the field, Garrus yelled, taunting it back.

Shepard risked another look. Nguyen was a whirl of violence in the mass of husks, kicking and throwing and tearing them apart where she could, covered in husk ash. North was shaking so hard Shepard could see it from here, flinching at every sound of the fight mere meters from where she stood. But she kept going. “Code is restored. Starting manual calibration—”

And just then a rush of static filled her ear. And a woman’s clipped British voice. “This is colony Horizon. We are under attack. I repeat, colony Horizon under Collector assault. Request immediate assistance.”

It was so unexpected, something she’d been waiting to hear so desperately since the warehouse, that at first she didn’t comprehend. Then another voice, Mordin’s. “Shepard! Comms back online!”

A relief so profound flooded Shepard that for a moment, she actually forgot the fight. The jamming signal was down. Kaidan was alive.

Mordin continued to talk. “Ground to Normandy. EDI, come in?”

Shepard recalled herself, and put her fingers to her own comm. “Patch me in.”
“—requires manual uplink channel.” EDI transitioned smoothly. “Hello, Shepard. The comm blackout preventing Horizon from calling for aid appears to have terminated. I am receiving SOS signals on all my channels.”

“We’ve got a tech on the ground. See if you can get through on Alliance channels.” Shepard ran back out onto the field to relieve Garrus. “We have to get that thing down!”

Mordin shot at it with his own pistol. “Small caliber weapons useless. Need new strategy.”

She raised her comm. “EDI!”

“Cerberus records indicate the hostile aerial unit is a wholly cybernetic entity known as a praetorian. Cerberus has not been able to acquire a specimen for dissection, but suspects the embedded husk components may be a weakness.” She paused, almost VI like, before moving on to the next topic. “Uplink established. Initializing calibration.”

The turrets began to swivel in a preset pattern. Somewhat to Shepard’s surprise, as soon as they moved, the praetorian took cover. Like it was worried.

She looked across the field at Garrus. “EDI says target the heads.”

“Roger that.”

At the console, North was conducting a harried conversation with EDI. Nguyen continued to patrol, her uniform torn in places. Shepard contacted Mordin. “Anything you can do.”

He thought furiously. “Husk specimens acquired during geth war showed strong susceptibility to alternating current at a frequency of five kilohertz. Effectively blocked cybernetic circuits.”

“Meaning—”

“May be able to prevent barrier regeneration, if you disable it first.”

“That’s perfect.” Then another question occurred to her. “How the hell did the Salarian Union get husk specimens?”

Before he could answer, Garrus called out a warning. “I think it’s figured out the guns are still offline.”

Indeed, the praetorian rose above the prefabs and dove towards them, trying to finish its job before EDI finished hers.

Oddly enough, that was the first moment since she woke up that Shepard experienced a purely doubt-free moment about their odds against the Collectors. They might be one small frigate, wracked by drama, but at least they weren’t stupid enough to target the gnats on the ground rather than the defense cannons that could destroy their ship.

She wasn’t given long to bask. It fired again, evaporating a steel barrel two meters in front of her in a spray of molten metal. She ducked out of the path of the debris.

EDI spoke up again. “Calibration complete. Populating targeting matrix now.”

Just what they needed. “Can you manually fire on the praetorian?”

“I do not recommend interrupting the targeting sequence—”
“Two cannons should be plenty to take out one cruiser.” Or at least convince the Collectors to leave for a softer target. “We need its barrier down or it’s not going to matter.”

“Acquiring new target.”

The turret nearest Shepard swiveled and locked on the praetorian. Shepard had no doubt EDI running it in manual mode was better than the GARDIAN computer could do in auto mode. It fired its lasers at the praetorian in short bursts.

It gave an electronic shriek and swiveled towards the cannon. For a heart-stopping moment, Shepard was sure it would destroy the gun. Which would teach it that it could and should destroy the guns. But then Garrus leaned out from behind a pillar with a yell of his own and poured bullets into the husk heads.

The praetorian screamed again and turned away to protect itself. Which brought the target into Shepard’s range.

She fired. Husk heads burst like cantaloupes. The praetorian shuddered viciously. Shepard redoubled her efforts. “It’s working!”

It tried to retreat, but halfway through the maneuver whatever powered its flight went offline. It fell to the ground and let off a shockwave of energy that left her team staggered. Shepard shook it off first, though every nerve twanged like an over-tuned guitar string. She ran at the praetorian heedless of its particle beam or her own safety. They had to put it down, now.

EDI ceased her fire as Shepard entered the target zone. Shepard held her rifle in both hands, trigger down, only shifting her aim to take out another head.

The last one popped. The praetorian sagged, one last scream of static, and did not rise. But she kept firing all the same.

“Shepard!” Garrus ran up behind her. She didn’t move. “Shepard, enough!”

He physically forced her arms down. “It’s over.”

She took a long, strangled breath. Looked at her handiwork. Then she pushed her sweaty hair off her forehead, and tried to let out some of the tension. “Can’t be too careful.”

He stared at her a moment. She gave him half a smile, and he chuckled.

North called out status from the console. “Fully powering GARDIAN system. Ninety seconds. Your tech is really good!”

Garrus burst out laughing. Shepard couldn’t contain a chuckle herself. “Yeah, you could say she has an inside track.”

Nguyen, however, was all business. “So you want to tell us what the hell you’re doing here? Because the navy doesn’t exactly recruit aliens, even for spec ops.”

Shepard glanced around. No sign of additional reinforcements. “Why don’t you call in your C.O., and we’ll all talk about it.”

Garrus rolled his eyes. Nguyen leveled her a suspicious look, but got on her comm. Then frowned. “He’s not responding.”
Something cold trickled through her stomach.

“Well,” said Garrus, with heavy sarcasm, “It’s not as if there’s been a lot to do here lately.”

But her mind was already churning. What if the attacks had stopped here because forces were diverted to the jamming tower? Silence was key to their strategy. Kaidan could be on his way to the Collector ship right now. Maybe already on board.

Her head jerked up. “Target the engines.”

Alenko pulled them out of the underbrush and down the last stretch of road, feet clumsy, Traynor’s weight pulling at his good arm, almost shaking with fatigue. If he’d had half a brain at all, he would have grabbed a muffin or something from the kitchen before they left the hotel. After all, he’d only had calorie discipline drilled into him over and over from the age of nine.

But here he stood. Stumbling towards the defense towers, no reserves, out of thermal clips with just a weak alien rifle and an injured specialist to help him. Even by the most optimistic estimation, they were walking to their own demise. All that kept him going was the idea of stopping now, after everything they endured today, was unthinkable.

That, and the fact that these people put their faith in the Alliance to keep them safe when they accepted those guns. No matter how ambivalently, or reluctantly. He had to get them operational.

Alenko was so focused on putting one foot in front of the other that he was startled when Traynor spoke. “Wait. Do you hear that?”

He paused. “That’s gunfire. Someone’s fighting at the construction site.”

“Maybe the techs made it after all?”

“But maybe some colonists had the same idea as us.” But hope flared. They weren’t alone. Maybe it would be enough to pull this off.

They hobbled faster. As they emerged onto the field, a monstrous Collector fell out of the sky with a thunderous crash. A distant figure ran at it, reckless, yelling and shooting. In a black hardsuit, with a broad stripe up the arm.

With red hair.

Alenko stood rooted to the spot, unable to think. Unable to breathe. Even without those clues, he’d have recognized her anywhere. The way she moved— confident, absolutely technically perfect in every way— and the way she returned fire, cavalier to the point of being cocky, all of it as clear as fingerprint. Or a face, one he never expected to see again. Nathaly.

He hadn’t realized he spoke out loud until Traynor looked up at him with a quizzical stare. “Who’s Nathaly?”

He shook his head. “A dead woman.”

Lazarus Station in pieces. Himself to Liara. Could you ever imagine, if she were alive, that she wouldn’t contact us?

Traynor wasn’t having it. “Commander Alenko, if you believe this is the proper time for cryptic
jokes, you have seriously misjudged not only the mood, but your audience as well.”

He started walking forward again, only just remembering not to move faster than she could manage, driven by a force almost primal in its intensity. “A woman I know to be dead somehow anticipated the attack, and showed up here just in time to save your colony. She’s standing right there.”

“She just… guessed we’d be attacked?”

“I don’t know.” But it wasn’t adding up. Lazarus Station was in pieces. Miranda told him she wouldn’t wake until October? That was still a month away. Just being conservative?

He lurched on.

Just how long had Nathaly been awake? And in whose company? Oh, holy god, Lazarus had worked, she was back here, she was back where he could see her and touch her… but at what cost? How was she here?

Traynor peered at him. “You’re thinking very hard. You’re upset.”

He cleared his throat. “Unlike me, she is spec ops, she’s borderline insane, and also she used to be my girlfriend.”

She straightened a little, disbelief overriding discomfort. “Your girlfriend allowed you to go on thinking she was dead?”

He hoped it wasn’t that simple. They could hear them arguing now, her voice a clarion call above the others. Familiar as an old wound.

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North looked up at Shepard in confusion. She shoved her out of the way and bent over the console, but couldn’t make heads or tails of the controls. “Target the damn engines. We need to keep that ship on the ground!”

Mordin touched her arm. “Trapping Collectors on Horizon sub-optimal solution for colonists. Prolongs conflict.”

She shook him off and continued to peck at the controls. “Damn it!”

The console beeped full power. The turrets swiveled towards the Collector ship and began to fire.

It was far enough off that the explosions against its hull were muted. But almost as soon as they hit, the ship began to rise. Shepard tried EDI instead, desperate. “Shepard to Normandy. I’m ordering you to take out the ship’s engines.”

EDI was as placid as always. “Subverting automatic targeting routine significantly lowers chance of success. Engines are small and difficult to target.”

She was frantic. “I don’t care. Do it!”

Joker came on the comm. “I know weather makes you crazy, but you need to calm down and start making sense.”

The ship accelerated upwards, shaking the ground. The turrets tracked it, increasingly off-target as
it gained speed. “No!”

Garrus put a hand on her arm, but she ran forward anyway, actually firing on the retreating ship with her rifle—as if it would make any difference. “Stop them! Joker!”

Static over her comm. “Commander, I am not putting our teensy tiny frigate up against that thing. Have you lost your mind?”

“Fuck!” She fired again. “Fuck—”

Then a voice behind her said, “Nathaly.”

She whirled in place. Dropped her gun into the mud, hands flying to her mouth.

Kaidan stared at her from fifteen meters back, supporting a limping colonist. Tired. His uniform torn and muddy, and his face unreadable.

Her heart was in her throat. Her voice thick around it. “I thought you were on the ship.”

He softened, relaxing into the same exhausted relief, a kind of giving in. The same half-strangled note, as he shook his head. Gently, he settled the colonist on the ground, and looked back at her. “Come here.”

She didn’t run. Not quite. He dropped his weapon and met her the last few steps, and caught her up in a tight hug, one that felt like it might break her bones. Her fingers dug into his back, taking up fistfuls of his shirt. His face buried in her neck, hand spread in her hair, cradling the back of her head.

His scent filled her nose. Sweat and soap and that awful off-brand deodorant he liked, and Kaidan. She’d almost forgotten. All of the hurt and confusion of the past six weeks fell off her. They were safe. She was home.

A smile grew on her face, irrepressible, and she redoubled the tightness of her arms. She let out a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob. Felt him squeeze her in response.

Kaidan drew back, just enough to see her face. Started to speak.

Her impulsivity got the best of her. She kissed him—light, quick, over almost as soon as it started—surprising Shepard as much as Kaidan. He blinked.

“I’m sorry,” she said, the words spilling out so fast they tripped over each other. She hadn’t let go of him. “I didn’t mean to— I kept telling myself it’s been two years, you need space, I couldn’t just assume—”

His hand slid across her cheek, brushing at her skin. The other still tangled in her hair, thumb brushing her ear, his eyes skimming her with disbelief and something else. Not saying anything.

“— I’ve just been wanting to see you so much, and I was afraid that—”

Kaidan leaned forward, drawing her face to his, and kissed her soundly. She shut up immediately.

If the Collectors were waiting for a parting shot, something with guaranteed success, that was the time. Because his lips met hers, and her brain flooded with such relief and joy and six weeks of profound need that every higher function blanked out. For a moment, Shepard heard nothing, saw nothing, perceived nothing but the exact volume of space occupied by their two bodies.
She tightened her embrace; he responded with a stifled little noise, the opposite of any objection, the fingers on her cheek sliding down to her neck. His mouth earnest and fervent, opening readily for hers. Like no time had passed at all. Like he needed this just as much.

This time, when they drew apart, it was slower, more natural. His eyes drifted over her again, baffled and delighted and fearful. “You don’t have to apologize. That’s the only thing I’ve wanted for two years.”

Another rush of that overwhelming cocktail, and she pressed her mouth to his again, quick and warm and wet. Stroking his face. “I thought you were on that ship.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “I wasn’t.”

She let out more than half a sob and hugged him again. Hating that she was this distraught, but Cerberus had her stretched to breaking since she woke up. He said, into her hair, “How are you here?”

There were so many answers to that question. Her head found his shoulder. “It’s a long story.”

He glanced, significantly, at the space the Collector ship had occupied. “We may have some time.”

Nguyen inserted herself, marching up to them without a moment’s consideration for tact. “Sir, what is going on here? You know her?”

Kaidan gave Shepard a dry glance, one she knew so well it made her smile all over again to see it. “You could say that.”

North spoke up, a bit quavering, where she huddled under the guns near Garrus. “She’s Shepard. Of course they know each other.”

“She’s that Shepard?” Then something clicked as she glanced between them. “Holy shit. You’re Project Lazarus.”

Nguyen stepped back and raised her gun. Shepard blinked, nonplussed. “You know about—”

“We’ve been investigating Cerberus for a long time,” Kaidan interrupted, apparently just as unconcerned that his sergeant might actually fire on them. “We thought they could be behind these attacks.”

“And I guess we got our answer.” Nguyen hadn’t lowered her rifle.

Garrus stepped between them. “I think you should let her explain. Hi, Kaidan.”

“Garrus,” he said, disconcerted, as if noticing him for the first time.

Garrus looked at Shepard. “We should contact the other teams. Let them know it’s over. And… maybe try to explain things to the Alliance personnel.”

That was a job and a half. “Do it.”

Garrus moved off. Nguyen lowered her weapon, but stayed put. Shepard ignored her. She still hadn’t let go of Kaidan, not entirely. At the back of his shoulder, her fingers encountered something wet. He flinched as she touched it. She was instantly distracted, taking in the injury. “You’re hurt—”
“It’s nothing.”

“The hell it isn’t. Mordin—”

Kaidan grumbled, but he let her settle him on the ground. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days. She kept hold of his arm as Mordin examined the wound, unwilling to separate herself. “This is Mordin Solus. He’s a doctor. He developed our counter-agent for the swarms.”

“Swarms you released,” Nguyen spat.

Shepard glared. “Yes, I definitely brought the Collectors here just so I could risk my ass driving them away. You saw me fighting them. Did that look fake to you?”

“Nguyen, stand down,” Kaidan said. She moved off, muttering, and stalked over to North. He submitted to Mordin’s examination with good grace, but there was a note of caution in his voice she didn’t like. As if he shared some of his sergeant’s doubts. “I wondered how you avoided the swarms.”

She was getting in Mordin’s way. Reluctantly, she relinquished her arm and curled it around her knees, tilting her head. “How did you manage?”

“Dumb luck, with a little biotics thrown in. Ow.” He glared at Mordin, who had flicked him in the middle of his brow with one finger.

“Unequal pupil dilation,” Mordin reported. “Migraine symptom.”

“You took your meds?” Shepard asked.

“No, because I’ve only been dealing with this problem for twenty years.”

Her face heated. “Sorry. I didn’t mean…”

He shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. It’s been a long day. And I’m absolutely starving.”

Mordin stood, and said, unnecessarily, “Biotic fatigue. Low energy, increased appetite, sluggish response to stimulus.”

“I’ve got something.” Shepard dug through a pouch until she came up with an energy bar, stubbornly ignoring the host of eavesdroppers clinging to their every word. “Here. I’m famished all the time these days. Guess that’s what I get for being on a liquid diet for two years.”

The look Kaidan gave her was grateful out of all proportion with the gesture. He accepted the bar and bit off a piece, chewed and swallowed. “About that. You’re supposed to be dead.”

“You don’t seem as surprised as I expected.” He knew about Lazarus. Just that it existed? Or something more?

He shook his head. “After this day, I don’t think I have anything left to be surprised.”

It struck Shepard as evasive. And she decided, then and there, that she didn’t give a damn. She refused to ruin this. Questions could come later. “The circumstances are terrible, but I’m so glad you’re here. You’re the only person I’ve wanted to see since I woke up.”

He looked her over again, doubt and wonder and confusion all warring for control of his expression, and repeated his question. “How are you here?”
Shepard knew it was coming. Her resurrection was absolutely the last thing she wanted to discuss. Instead, she glanced down at the grass. “Do we have to talk about this now?”

He went on, patiently, but with a particular edge she couldn’t quite read. “I don’t just mean alive. I mean here, on Horizon. How did you know to be here?”

She looked into his face. “It’s… complicated.”

He levered himself to his feet, crumpling the wrapper. “I need your medi-gel. My specialist is hurt.”

He nodded towards the colonist, or at least, the woman Shepard took for a colonist due to her civvies. She also stood. “Let Mordin do it.”

“Happy to help,” Mordin said, and left them alone in the grass. She watched him kneel down and start talking to his patient.

Kaidan looked back at her with the same unreadable expression. Her brow furrowed. “Kaidan, what is it?”

“The Alliance sent me here to figure out who’s behind these colony abductions.” He continued, inexorable. “The Collectors have no reason to go to war. And Lazarus was a Cerberus project. Nathaly, I really need a straight answer.”

She went with the only one that didn’t require a much longer explanation. “The Collectors are working for the reapers. They brought husks.”

“I know. I saw them.” But he remained conflicted.

She touched his face. “Kaidan, it’s me. You can talk to me.”

“Is it?” he asked, before he could stop himself.

She felt like he’d slapped her. “How can you say that?”

“Where have you been?” Something quiet, something desperate, something hurt.

But before she could answer, the whine of a shuttle filled the sky. They looked up. Beside her, Kaidan went still as he took in the paint job. His face going blank.

Her heart contracted around a single word. Please…

The shuttle settled on the field. The door swung open, and Miranda stepped out. Miranda, with her prominent Cerberus insignia, her black-and-white uniform.

The moment he saw Miranda, Kaidan made a lightening quick glance at Shepard’s face, at her distress, and misinterpreted it completely. Immediately putting his body between them and reaching for a gun that wasn’t there. “What did you do to her?”

Miranda watched him, her expression hard and oddly annoyed. Debating how to answer. She glanced at Shepard, once, and then back at Kaidan. “I saved her life.”

Something in Shepard melted at his gesture. Not because she enjoyed or particularly needed his protection, but because for all their objections, not one person had made any effort to help her against Cerberus since she woke up. Not one person had found their actions invasive or disturbing enough to try.
But they had a bigger problem. She attempted to diffuse the situation. “It’s ok. I can explain—”

But he took another step towards Miranda. “Cerberus assassinated an admiral. You kept people as living subjects for biotic experiments.” He jabbed a finger back towards Shepard. “You killed her entire goddamn squad. She’d never be here with you. What did you do to her?”

“Ask her yourself,” Miranda answered coldly. Then she turned back to the shuttle, and began issuing orders to the rest of the team.

He turned back. Something pleading in his expression. A horror swept through her. She licked her lips, said the first thing that came to mind. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Kaidan stared at her. Like she was a suspect, or a monster. “How long have you been back?”

Her throat closed up. “Only six weeks.”

His face snapped shut. It broke something inside her. “Six weeks.”

“I didn’t know what to say—”

“You didn’t know what to say?” His voice rising. “That’s your excuse?”

“If you only knew how complicated—”

He gestured at the people milling about. “So complicated you could tell Garrus, and Cerberus, and god knows who else, but I didn’t even rate a fricking email?”

“It wasn’t like that.” Scrambling after this conversation, trying to stop him from destroying this moment. “Please don’t do this. If you’d just let me—”

“Did you break into my apartment?” he demanded, running right over her attempts to explain.

That put a spark to her nascent panic, that this was all slipping away from her, and flamed it into true anger. “How could you ever believe that?”

“How could you ever work for Cerberus?”

“I’m not working for them!” Shouting now, herself. “They kept me as a lab rat for two years!”

“Well, you’re doing a great job acting like it,” he shot back. “Painting the shuttle shows real commitment.”

By now everyone was staring. His squad, her team, a few of the colonists who had crawled out of hiding or stasis and come to see what all the fuss was about.

She ran her hand over her hair. Reaching for a calm she didn’t feel. Needing, somehow, to bring this back to that first instant when he ran across the field and held her tight.

The familiar gesture didn’t escape him. “Hell, forget Akuze. The Nathaly I knew would’ve been fully willing to kill every last member of Cerberus for chopping off her hair.”

The cheap shot stung, as it was meant to. Because Kaidan knew every single soft spot she had, and exactly how much she had to hate what they’d done to her physically. “That’s not fair.”

But because he was Kaidan, he also regretted it as soon as the words left his mouth. He looked away, and steadied himself. “I… I know. I’m sorry. But, Nathaly, this is… unimaginable.”
And because she was Shepard, she didn’t forgive quite that easily. “I’m dead, remember? I wasn’t looking at a lot of options.”

Kaidan took a breath. And then another, trying to quell his own outrage. “You had at least one more. You still do.”

She crossed her arms. “And what’s that?”

“Come back.” Incredulous, as if he couldn’t believe he had to say it. “Report in. Tell the Alliance what happened.”

A sudden longing for home overwhelmed her, so much that she had to briefly close her eyes. When she opened them again, she found his gaze boring into her. Not pleading, but accusing. Her face hardened. “And what good would that do, exactly? For me or anyone else?”

His temper flared again. “Heaven forbid the great Commander Shepard, spectre of the Citadel, ever be accountable to anyone but herself.”

“I have never been like that.” She gestured at the colony, at the empty buildings, the scorch marks from the praetorian, the overwhelming devastation. “Look at this. The Alliance can’t fix this. And someone has to.”

“Bullshit. The Alliance—”

She didn’t let him get in any kind of real response. “You’re right. It’s not can’t. It’s won’t. Because politics is more important than people.”

That was the moment he gave up on calm entirely. “They sent me here to figure out what was happening.”

“No, they sent you here to fuck around with a defense cannon. I don’t like Cerberus. But I’m using them to do something about this situation. The Alliance would stick me in a lab, if I’m lucky, or in the brig if I’m not. Who would that help?”

He scoffed, incredulous. “You know, whatever else Cerberus did to you, at least you’re not a clone. Nobody but Nathaly could be this brain-dead stubborn.”

“And nobody but you could have such a self-righteous sense of morality,” she spat back.

Kaidan stiffened. Her words hung in the air. Thirty seconds passed without anyone saying a word. Shepard licked her lips. All the fury had abandoned her. “Kaidan, I—”

“Stop.” He rubbed his forehead. “Just stop.”

But she never stopped. Not even when it was the best thing to do. “I didn’t mean that. Really, I didn’t.”

Nothing she said could reach him. “How did you know the Collectors would hit Horizon?”

She swallowed. “It’s been impossible. I wish you’d let me—”

“How,” he said again, “Did you know the Collectors planned to attack Horizon?”

Her silence said it all. So he asked the follow-up. “How did the Illusive Man know to send you here? Or haven’t you thought about it?”
The only sound was the light breeze rippling the leaves. After almost a full minute, she said, “I didn’t ask.”

“I have things to do.” He didn’t check any of his harshness, cold and unforgiving as the void itself. She’d never seen him so furious. Nowhere was the Kaidan she knew, the man she loved. In his place was someone she couldn’t touch. “Somebody human put up the jamming tower. It’ll all be in my report. Maybe the navy will buy your story, but don’t believe for a second I do. God even knows what you are now, if you can stand here and tell me working with Cerberus is the right thing.”

He started towards the turret controls. Shepard stepped towards him, her voice low, angry as she’d ever been herself. But she was all fire. “Where the hell are you going?”

“To check what your people did to the gun, and then figure out how to help the survivors.”

“Don’t be an idiot. I’ve got a team, and a ship. I can help.”

“You’ve done enough.” He looked back at her. Tired. “Nathaly, just… just go.”

For a long moment, she held his eyes. But she was too proud, and looked away before he could see how wounded she really was. “Fine. Have it your way.”

She rounded up her team and stalked back to the shuttle. Distantly, she heard Nguyen arguing—you’re just letting them leave?—and found she didn’t care about his answer. And she didn’t look to see if he was watching, as the hatch shut and the shuttle powered up, and lifted off Horizon.

\\\\

Wind rocked the shuttle as they exited the atmosphere. Shepard sat in the corner, her knees drawn up to her chest, staring out the port as the ground dwindled away.

Nobody had spoken. Even Grunt had picked up on the mood, and sat quietly, fidgeting with his shotgun.

Garrus seemed to be waiting for her to explode. Shepard thought she was more likely to throw up.

Instead of doing either, she reached into one of her suit pouches, and drew out the pack of batarian cigarettes she’d lifted off Cathka. Stared at them a moment. She’d told herself she’d quit. Wasn’t sure why she’d stolen them in the first place.

Her face hardened. Fuck that. Quitting was before Kaidan sent her away.

She looked up at her crew, such as they were, and made a quick assessment on who was most likely to have the other thing she needed. “Zaeed, got a light?”

His face twitched, and she knew the guess was accurate. But he didn’t protest. Instead he reached into a pouch and tossed it across the cabin.

Miranda sat up, alarmed, as Shepard caught it easily and proceeded to tap out one of the cigarettes. “What are you doing?”

Shepard ignored her, placed the cigarette between her lips and lit up. A bit of puffing and the end caught. She blew out the smoke, folded the lighter in her hand, and turned back to the window.

Miranda persisted. “You’ll set off the alarms.”
She took another drag, not bothering to respond. Kaidan hadn’t given her one spare breath to explain. She’d imagined seeing him again from the moment she awoke, and in her worst nightmares, she’d feared it would go exactly like this. But she never really believed it. Certainly, she never pictured he could kiss her like he’d missed every second, and then deny knowing her at all.

Smoke curled overhead. She shouldn’t have left things like that. Her stomach was in knots. But arguing wasn’t working, either, and Kaidan never responded to pressure.

“Shepard, really.” Miranda leaned forward, and made to grab the cigarette.

Her glare stopped her cold. “He was right. I didn’t ask how the Illusive Man knew to send us here.”

She tossed her hair, clearly holding onto her patience with both hands. “The comm blackouts. Remember? They’ve been intermittent for days.”

But Shepard had lived in space her whole life. “It’s a pioneer colony. They never have enough energy to meet their needs. What made this time different?”

“Does it matter? The Alliance sent them a defense cannon, for Christ’s sake. Even the navy believed Horizon could be a target.”

She just sank back further in her couch, and continued to watch Horizon shrink to a large marble as they approached the Normandy. Right then, she didn’t care if her cigarette set the shuttle on fire. It didn’t seem like it could possibly make any difference. But instead the shuttle bay forward hatch opened and ingested them without incident.

Zaeed held out his hand as they disembarked. She deposited the lighter in his palm without a word, and padded to the elevator on autopilot. None of her team followed; none of them wanted to be near her right now. Good. She didn’t want to see them, either.

The door shut. She reached for the button to her cabin, but instead, the elevator’s speaker activated. Her comm officer, Goldstein. “Shepard, the Illusive Man is waiting on standby for your report.”

The trepidation in her voice clearly conveyed her expectation that Shepard would tell him to fuck off, and Goldstein would have the dubious joy of delivering that reply. But as it happened, Shepard did have something to say to him. “I’ll head to the comm room.”

Surprise. Almost more nervous now. “Yes, ma’am.”

Shepard punched the button for Deck 2 and waited, thinking of nothing at all.

The elevator hatch opened. She strode into the room, found it already configured for a holo call, and stepped onto the pad. Covered in mud and sweat.

The Illusive Man’s office loaded in. She took another drag, waiting.

As per usual, he was smoking as well. A different brand. Something human, she was sure. Or maybe not— hypocrisy was certainly not beneath him, and snobbery was his element, nothing but the very best of everything.

He tapped off his ash. “Good work on Horizon. You’ve certainly given the Collectors pause.”
She made no reply, smoke spiraling beside her face. That would be Miranda. No doubt she’d reported in brief as soon as the Collector ship lifted off.

Kaidan was right about Cerberus’ involvement. Had to be. But she wanted to hear it from the Illusive Man himself.

If he was perturbed by her reticence, it didn’t show. “It’ll take a few days to collate everything we’ve learned from this attack.”

“There was a jamming tower erected in the woods,” she said, perfectly flat. She gave her nearly-spent cigarette a glance, and stubbed it out with her boot. Not caring what it did to the transmitter.

“That explains the comm blackout.” Admitting nothing. “Just another reasons the Collectors will be more careful from now on. Good for the colonists, bad for us.”

She baited her hook, and let out a little more line. “Nice guess, figuring it would be Horizon. Quite a coincidence that Kaidan just happened to be there.”

“You knew the Collectors tried to acquire your body. It shouldn’t come as a shock they kept looking for you.” He paused, put the cigarette to his lips. Exhaled smoke. “Your loyalty to your crew was infamous, and not just inside the Alliance. Commander Alenko was an excellent way to draw their interest.”

The bottom fell out of her stomach. That wasn’t the answer she expected. Not at all. “Draw their interest—”

“It’s a big galaxy. I couldn’t just wait for them to hit another random target, not when we were in dire need of information. How little we got from Ferris Fields proved that.”

She wet her lips. There was a buzzing in her head. “You told the Collectors Kaidan was on Horizon, and I’d come looking for him.”

“I leaked a few rumors.” He gestured with the cigarette. “Surely you understand—”

“I understand?” Her voice rose. Anger was an old friend. Rage a passing acquaintance, but familiar to her. Whatever was rising up in her chest was beyond them both. Something that made a supernova look like a firecracker. “You set the Collectors on Kaidan.”

Kaidan could have died. Possibly the Illusive Man had hoped he would. He wasn’t big on complications, or distractions, and she’d proven difficult to manage. Maybe he wanted her to have a very personal reason to focus on the Collectors, and stop questioning his motives.

She’d worried since waking up that Cerberus would use Kaidan against her, that he’d be caught in the maelstrom of her life. Fears apparently well-founded.

The Illusive Man’s blue eyes hardened, the imbedded cybernetics glittering coldly. “I will always use every tool available to defend humanity from this threat. Defeating the Collectors takes precedence above all other considerations.”

She exploded. “Tools?!”

He exhaled. “Shepard—”

“You want the Collectors? You want me to understand?” She was yelling now. Screaming, actually, barely registering the words coming out of her mouth. Dust rained down from the ceiling,
shaken loose by the sheer volume of her voice. “Understand this. If you ever— ever— EVER threaten someone I love again, you’ll have to find a way to leave this universe to be safe from me!”

“Calm yourself.” His tone was solid ice.

Shepard stepped off the pad, so full of fury she was shaking, and severed the comm link immediately.

In the CIC, every person stared as she came around the corner. Stock still. Waiting. Clearly, they’d overheard every word.

“He tried to kill my boyfriend.” It came out as a croak, voice completely shot. Her throat sore and hoarse. “The Illusive Man sent the Collectors to Horizon.”

Their stares turned to disbelief. A whisper ran through the room, an exchange of uncertain looks, touched by horror. She didn’t wait for their questions. Right now, she didn’t trust herself to be able to answer coherently.

Instead, Shepard pressed the elevator call button, found it already waiting, and selected the button for her cabin.

The carriage began to rise. She looked up at the lights in the ceiling, taking very shallow, shaky breaths.

Cerberus had used her to provoke an attack that disappeared at least half a colony. Kaidan had gotten caught in the crossfire. And if she tried to warn him now, she doubted he’d even take her call. In her hesitancy, her fear, she’d destroyed any shred of trust between them.

That seemed by design, too. A contingency if he survived the attack, to sever her last tie to the Alliance. No matter what happened, the Illusive Man won. That sounded like him.

Why the hell hadn’t she sucked it up and contacted Kaidan? All the scrupulous avoidance in the world, all the suffering alone, and Cerberus still hurt him. It hadn’t mattered at all. God, she’d been so stupid.

The elevator dinged. She stepped out onto her tiny foyer, and proceeded into her cabin. Stared at the room without seeing it for several minutes. Then, practically on autopilot, she entered the bathroom, and turned on the shower. Stood in the warm cascade, mud sluicing off her hardsuit, leaning into the wall. Feeling the water soak down through her neck and into her undersuit in a slow capillary advance.

The first week of basic training, the navy gave every recruit a swim test. Marines operated on all worlds, in every kind of environment. Like most spacer kids, Shepard failed miserably. Naturally, when she was posted near an ocean not long after, she assumed learning to do a hundred laps in a still pool was about the same thing and nearly died on a dare.

She felt like that now. Tumbling in the waves, gulping for air and swallowing only sea water, fingers clawing at the sand. But no matter how she fought, the shore and Kaidan standing on it kept slipping further away, until she couldn’t even see it at all. Like Cerberus had drowned her.
The Night Saren Died

September 2185

Alenko stared out the port as the shuttle made its final approach to the relay. They got orders to return home less than twelve hours after the attack ended, but with Horizon in shambles, it took some doing to get a flight out. His techs were still waiting for their own ride. Under other circumstances, he might have cared that they refused to leave the hotel, and instead hid with the staff. But it wouldn’t have made any difference.

The fight played out over and over in his head. Six weeks. Six weeks of silence, of working with Cerberus, working on this so-called mission, and not a word to him. Not a breath.

He shifted in his seat, wincing as his shoulder twinged. The colonial doc put his arm in a sling, to immobilize it while the stab wound from the wasp’s stinger healed. His mind continuing to drift.

That first moment, when she turned and saw him. Her hands over her mouth. I thought you were on the ship. And god, but she felt the same. Tasted the same. The smile in her eyes and the sound of her laugh, all perfectly spot-on. She’d lost muscle mass, obvious to him even under the hardsuit, and that spark of worry was familiar, too.

Never in a million years had he imagined she’d stay with Cerberus after she woke up. Not once. That wasn’t Nathaly, not even close.

Nguyen spoke. “I still can’t believe you just let them leave.”

She was sitting across from him, facing him, North asleep on her shoulder. He shook his head, more tired than annoyed. “I’m not going through it again.”

“All this time, you knew Shepard was Lazarus, and you didn’t think to warn anyone that Cerberus had their hands on an N7 operative.” Nguyen shook her head, beyond disgust. “You know the things they could have learned just with a damn VI? Never mind reviving her, if that’s even what they did—”

“It’s what they did.” He wasn’t about to go into his first visit to Lazarus Station, last February. “You’re not going to rake me over about the rest of it?”

“The fraternization?” She scoffed. “I put that one together the moment North dropped the tidbit about your dead girlfriend. No other reason for you to go that hard on Farrell. Jackson’s going to flip shit.”

He raised his eyebrows. It seemed unlikely Nguyen could have resisted taunting him. “She doesn’t know?”

Nguyen settled back. “It didn’t seem like her business. That was before the Cerberus connection.”

His team, Specialist Traynor, and more than a handful of colonists had witnessed their fight. That particular cat was well out of its bag. So he switched topics. “You never told me how you got this assignment.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nobody’s in this squad because they asked for it. Well, maybe Marshall, but I’m guessing he
didn’t sign up for what this squad became.” He folded his free arm over his lap, candid. “So what
the hell happened on the Agincourt?”

She made an exasperated noise. “I hit Thorne.”

That wasn’t what he expected. He waited a moment, and then said, “Care to elaborate?”

“Not really.”

“Who else are you going to tell?”

“From where I sit, you’re going to be lucky to come out of this without a disciplinary hearing.”

“From where I sit, too.” He let out a breath. “Look, the thing with Farrell. I didn’t mean for it to
happen. It was the worst time in my life, he was hitting every sore spot, and I just... snapped. I’m
not expecting it to make a difference to you.”

She turned away. “You don’t know me.”

“We’ve worked together awhile now.”

“I don’t come to work looking for friends. Gets too complicated, when they get hurt, when they
die, when they get into interpersonal drama like this and make you pick a side.”

“You apparently decked your C.O.”

Nguyen crossed her arms and watched him evenly. “Officers should be able to take care of
themselves. It’s another thing when he started going after the kids.”

“Things got heated between you?”

“I don’t threaten. One day enough was enough. So I laid him out. Knew when I did it, I was
gone. Just surprised they let me keep my rank.” She turned back to the window. “People should
pay for the things they do. Me, Thorne, you. Farrell. If I’d known he was taunting you about
your supposedly dead girlfriend, I would’ve helped you put him down.”

“She wasn’t ‘supposedly-dead’. She was dead.” He massaged his forehead. “You read the
Lazarus files.”

“I read some files, edited by you, to spare your girlfriend some indignity.” Her eyes narrowed.
“Or at least that’s what you told us. Could have been more. Like maybe that she was only injured,
or working for Cerberus all along.”

More of that same cold anger stirred. “You don’t know what the hell you’re saying.”

She met him stare for stare. “Maybe you’re in on it, too.”

His voice rose, more than he intended. “I didn’t risk my life and watch over three hundred
thousand people get carted away to listen to your paranoia.”

Before Nguyen could do more than suck in a breath, North stirred, looking at the both of them
blearily. She’d done little but sleep since the attack. “Don’t tell me you’re still arguing.”

“He just let Cerberus leave—”

“For crying out loud, Tuyet.” North was exasperated. “There were eight or nine of them and three
of us. What did you want him to do? Don’t you think we’ve all had it hard enough the past four
days?”

“He seemed to have an easy time taking on the Collectors,” she shot back. “Traynor said he took
out four, all by himself. Four. He broke out of wasp stasis. And you saw him tear into those
husks.”

North glanced his way, quick and furtive, again with just that smallest glint of fear. He tried not to
let it get to him. But it had happened before. He’d earned a dozen special commendations over the
years, and each had exactly two things in common: a grateful unit, and a superior who had him re-
assigned within the next several months. No hard feelings, they’d say. It’s just the other
marines… Well. Biotics are one thing, but the stuff you can do… It’s impacting cohesion. Your
next post will be lucky to have you.

Every superior up until Nathaly, anyway. She hadn’t tolerated that kind of talk from her crew, or
anyone else, for that matter. She’d yelled at a colonist on Feros. Those biotics just saved the lives
of these defenders, so whatever your problem is, I suggest you get over it. Looking every inch
prepared to start a fight, if necessary. Nobody had ever done that for him before. Hell, his own
family flinched if he used biotics to so much as dump a hot pan in the sink without an oven mitt.

But North only said, a touch tremulous, “It didn’t look that easy to me.”

And to Alenko’s surprise, Nguyen pursed her lips, and actually shut up. They all sat like that for
five or ten minutes, until North tentatively asked, “Was that really Shepard?”

The warmth of her hand in that clean room aboard Lazarus matched the warmth of her cheek
pressed against his face on Horizon. He looked out the port, dully. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t understand how you couldn’t know.”

“It’s been two years. A few months ago, I woke up and I couldn’t remember the sound of her
voice.” Not mentioning how scary that morning had been; he’d been less terrified on Ilos, on the
Citadel during the battle, on the Normandy as it came apart around him, than in that moment of
realization.

And then on Horizon, he saw her across a field and she opened her mouth, and he wondered how in
the hell he ever could have forgotten. Took her face in his hands and kissed her like his life
depended on it, and even now, sitting in this shuttle with Nguyen and her bevy of accusations, he
didn’t have a shred of regret about letting anyone see that.

Alenko cleared his throat. “Nothing prepares you for losing your best friend. So it’s safe to say
nothing prepares you for meeting her again, either.”

Nguyen slid her attention back to him as he spoke, an odd expression on her face, but she glanced
away as soon as she saw he’d noticed. Alenko checked his omni-tool. Cleared his throat and
changed the subject. “We’re twenty minutes out. Jackson said she’d meet us at the dock. Brass
wants a debrief.”

“Better you than me,” said Nguyen.

Alenko wasn’t exactly looking forward to it, either. He just wanted to go home and sleep. Maybe
this would all make sense after a little downtime. Maybe then, he’d know what to do, what he
should have said. Because it sure as hell wasn’t what actually came out of his mouth.

But that was Nathaly all over. She had a way of getting under people’s skin. He liked that about
her, once, though it had always been exasperating.

As promised, Jackson was waiting when they came off the shuttle. It was evening on the Citadel, the dock sparsely populated, and she stood out in her navy uniform and militantly braided hair. She spared them the pleasantries. “The Council wants to see you immediately.”

Alenko blanched. “How did the Council get involved?”

“It was Anderson’s op.” She glanced at Nguyen and North. “The pair of you, lay low until we’re done. Cook’s on the warpath. He needs to hear whatever there is to hear from me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” They saluted, and made their way to a taxi. Undoubtedly, they were just as relieved to be spared.

“Thanks for the tip about Cook,” Alenko said, slinging his rucksack over his good shoulder as they made their way to Jackson’s car. “But I’m not sure why you had to come down here.”

“There’s also a bit of circus outside the base.” She opened the canopy, and they climbed inside.

“Circus?”

“We weren’t lucky enough to have the Collectors abduct all the journalists on Horizon.” She snorted. “Alliance involvement leaked. They’ve been shouting questions at every uniform walking through the hatch. I don’t think they know your names yet, but it’s only a matter of time.”

He groaned. “Perfect.”

Jackson started the car and rose up into the air, moving towards the flow of traffic. The Citadel had no rapid transit, but a host of cabs and personal vehicles, which moved along predefined flight paths between points of interest. Officially, there weren’t roads, but C-Sec got interested fast if a car deviated from an expected route.

She wore her dress blues. Alenko frowned, more confused by the minute. “Do I need to change?”

Jackson took him in as if really seeing him for the first time. “Sweet lord. Have you even slept?”

“Not especially.” He cleared his throat. He still hadn’t gotten a real answer. “Why come pick me up?”

“I’m not about to send one of my marines into a debrief with Councilor Anderson and a half-dozen other rabid brass completely unrepresented by his own command.” Then, a bit more stiffly, “And it’s not my opinion that Colonel Cook is situated to act on your behalf.”

Alenko eyed her. “How long have you been doing an end-run around Cook?”

“I’ve worked in CT for three years.”

A polite reply, that was and wasn’t an answer. He’d known she didn’t think much of their C.O., but this was nearly insubordinate. “He’s going to be pissed.”

“I know where Cerberus took the things they stole from you. I’d wager that will provide sufficient distraction.”

That stopped him cold. “Where?”

She smiled, smugly. “Sanctum. We got a new lead, from someone working on the inside until
recently. It matched up with logs from that Blue Suns ship. You would have known all this if you’d bothered to read your emails.”

Alenko settled his rucksack between his feet. “I needed some space.”

Actually, he was concerned Nathaly would contact him, try to push for the last word or reconciliation, because she was nothing if not impatient. He wasn’t even a little ready to deal with that. He still felt sick every time her name crossed his mind.

Jackson’s green eyes narrowed. “I heard some other things. Rumors even stranger than the sudden exponential growth in Collector forces.”

He watched the ward streaming past, ignoring the goad. If he couldn’t think about Nathaly, he sure as hell wasn’t going to invite discussion about her.

She went on. “I don’t understand why Cerberus would be trading with the Collectors, and fighting them at the same time. Not over a few clones.”

“That makes two of us.” There was no reason for Cerberus to set that jamming tower, and send Nathaly to repel the attack. Unless their objective was separate from the attack itself. “I still don’t get why you’re here.”

“I don’t have to stay. I just assumed…” She blinked. “You’re very calm. Anyone else on this squad would be losing it, and badly in need of the support.”

“Nguyen?”

“She hides it better.” Not letting him evade the question. She might even be right— the more anxious Nguyen got, the more uptight and prone to anger.

“Who says I’m not losing it?” He rubbed his eyes. His body and his psyche both felt beaten to a pulp. He’d had a low-grade headache since the migraine subsided, his implant thrown completely out of calibration by events, and he hadn’t had an opportunity or the equipment to sit down and fix it. “Maybe I’m just too tired to have a dramatic breakdown.”

She chuckled perfunctorily. “You haven’t responded to any message in days. Nobody’s that tired.”

“I responded to orders,” he pointed out, evidenced by his presence on the station. Alenko turned his face to the window. “I saw Nathaly on Horizon. It got messy. I don’t want to talk to her.”

It took her a moment. Then she sat up straight. “You mean Shepard. That scuttlebutt is true? She showed up on Horizon?”

“She didn’t stay long.” Realizing it took her six weeks and a Collector invasion to bother speaking to him, after he spent a year and a half grieving her, and another six months worried to death, was like a pole through his gut. Some giant, awkward thing he had to drag around with him, that hurt worse and worse with every passing second and never leveled off, but if he pulled it out he’d die. “She was with Cerberus.”

“Cerberus?!” Jackson nearly swerved out of her lane.

“Yeah.” He slumped down in his seat, rubbing his shoulder just the smallest bit against the fabric. Wound itching; the doc dumped it full of medical nanites, accelerating his body’s natural healing, but at what price? He’d been resisting the urge to swab it out with some kind of giant q-tip for
days.

“Is she the one who took the stuff from your place?”

“She said she didn’t.”

“And you believed her?”

Alenko was surprised to find he did. He had no idea what Cerberus did to gain her cooperation, and wasn’t sure he wanted to know. But there was enough of her left to convince him that if she wanted something he had, burglary wouldn’t be her first choice.

Jackson took his silence for reconsideration. “Everything makes more sense with Shepard as the culprit. She was a spectre. She’d have all kinds of security accesses here.”

He shifted again in his seat. “Nobody really gets her. Nathaly, I mean.”

She scoffed. “This being the part where you tell me you do?”

“For starters, the robbery was just plain stupid. They tore my whole place apart, instead of searching the most likely places first. It was vindictive and childish.” He sat back, shook his head. “Whatever else is going on, she’s not a child, and she doesn’t hate me.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet.” Jackson glanced at him, sour and cynical.

“For another,” he continued, ignoring that comment altogether, “Nathaly is nothing if not direct. She doesn’t send a message by leaving my home in pieces. She doesn’t send messages at all.”

She pursed her lips, but let it drop. They set down in a car park on the Presidium, and from there it was only a brief walk to Anderson’s office. As they made their way, Jackson switched topics. “I heard about the techs. How’s the rest of the squad?”

“North’s a wreck. Can’t keep her eyes open more than a half hour here and there. Probably a good thing. But she really saved the day— Nguyen said we’d never have gotten the gun online before the assault killed the defenders without her.”

Jackson eyed him sidelong. “You did a little saving yourself. Smart move, going after the jamming tower.”

“We only knew it was there thanks to Specialist Traynor.” He cleared his throat. Alenko had never been entirely comfortable with praise. “I heard back right before we left. Her mom grabbed her sister and the dog, and they waited out the attack in a hurricane shelter. No windows and fifteen centimeters of cinder block— the swarms never knew they were there. And her dad was safe where we left him.”

“They’re lucky. Luckier than most of the colony, anyway.” She paused in her step. “You don’t see that every day.”

The anterior of Anderson’s office was swarming with junior officers. His asari assistant darted between them, looking harassed and trying to bring a sense of order to the overflow. Alenko blinked. “That can’t be just staff. How many brass did Anderson invite?”

“Maybe he wanted to limit eyes and ears, and kicked out all the lower-ranked.” But she didn’t sound convinced.
They shouldered their way to the hatch, Alenko growing more self-conscious about his rumpled service utilities. Inside the office wasn’t much better. Slightly quieter, if only because admirals were less excitable than their staffs. He started counting bars and stopped when he got dizzy. And not just brass. Several quieter personnel stood around the room, dressed in black suits with a certain severity that reminded Alenko strongly of the men who came to his parents’ house when he was nine, and took him away to Jump Zero.

Maybe he should have expected it; they were starving for intel on the colony abductions, and of course Nathaly’s name had its own peculiar gravity. But this level of interest had surely surpassed necessity and become voyeurism.

Jackson wasn’t faring much better. He heard her take a steadying breath and mutter something that sounded a lot like a curse. Then she stiffened, as just beyond the throng three holopads lit up. The Council had arrived.

Anderson greeted them. “Thank you for joining us on such short notice.”

Udina moved up beside him. That was an unpleasant surprise. Alenko heard he stayed on as staff; Nathaly had remarked she hoped Anderson had someone tasting his food. “As you can see, certain senior officials from the Alliance navy and intelligence ministry have joined us. We’re just waiting for our star witness.”

The salarian councilor looked directly at Alenko, her voice like an elderly cat. “I believe he is already present.”

Every head turned towards the hatch. Alenko never had so many people watching him at once. It felt like BAaT, trapped in that room after killing Vyrnnus, while one official after another crowded in to grill him. Was it premeditated? Come on, we know how you students felt about him. Maybe he should have been intimidated, but now that he recognized such treatment for what it was, he was only infuriated.

Jackson spoke, drawing him back to the present. Her voice the slightest bit unsteady. “We came directly from the dock. You did say not to stand on ceremony, sir.”

“Good.” Anderson gestured, and a pile of senior aides scrambled to clear a path. “We’re all eager to hear your account.”

It wasn’t a suggestion. Alenko abruptly realized he was still carrying his rucksack. The thud of it hitting the floor seemed to reverberate. “Sir, I’m not sure what I can tell you that wasn’t in my report.”

“I realize you must be worn thin, but this is too critical to wait.” He looked to his left. Alenko belatedly recognized Hackett, with his intelligence aide Rahimi beside him. She offered him a shark’s smile.

But it was the asari councilor, Irissa, who took the lead. “I’ve read your report, Commander. Several times. I find it hard to believe none of these events are connected.”

He walked forward, and moved to clasp his hands behind his back at an automatic parade rest. His arm twitched in its sling, and he ended up with the other awkwardly hanging at his side. “An official report isn’t the place for speculation.”

“Then you agree? There is some connection between Cerberus, the Collectors, and possibly even this colony itself?”
“I don’t believe coincidence can be that timely. Cerberus knew Horizon was about to be attacked.” Almost wincing as he said it, remembering hurling that same observation at Nathaly as an accusation, as if anyone ever won in that kind of argument. That their relationship had been reduced to who won.

Anderson glanced at his fellow councilors. “Maybe it’s what we’re all thinking. Or maybe Cerberus just has better intel in the Terminus than our governments.”

“Spirits help us if that’s true.” That grating voice belonged to Quentius, the turian councilor, who replaced Sparatus after the destruction of the Destiny Ascension at the hands of Saren’s fleet. From news reports, Alenko gathered he was more open-minded than his predecessor, though that didn’t count for much in galactic politics.

Anderson shook his head. “For certain the Collectors represent a larger and deadlier force than any of us realized.”

The salarian, Asheel, spoke again, her inner eyelids flicking upward. “How is it possible the Collectors amassed the ability to abduct and store so many people without any of us becoming aware? And if we didn’t see that coming, how can we say they will continue to target only humans?”

Only humans. It didn’t matter until there salarian, turian, or asari victims. Clearly, giving Anderson a council seat hadn’t done a damned thing to change their priorities.

But all Anderson said was, “We can’t.”

He was a proud man, self-controlled, unflappable. But just now he looked completely defeated. This job had done what twenty years of war with turians and batarians could not.

Alenko straightened and addressed Asheel directly. “I can answer one of those questions. The Collectors aren’t acting alone. Maybe that’s the difference.”

The three telepresence councilors exchanged a knowing, tired look. Irissa said, delicately, “Yes, we noted your theory that the Collectors are using pieces of technology evidently borrowed from Saren Arterius and the geth.”

“Borrowed from reapers,” he corrected. Jackson buried her face in her hands.

“Ah, yes, ‘reapers’.” Quentius actually performed the air quotes, four of his six claw-like fingers hovering by his head. “The immortal race of sentient starships allegedly waiting in dark space. We have dismissed that claim.”

“They’re making husks,” he said bluntly. “And something is taking control of individual Collectors, just like Sovereign took over Saren’s body during the Battle of the Citadel.”

Irissa’s patience thinned. “Or so Commander Shepard said. I understand she suffered a severe head injury earlier in the battle—”

“I was with her on the ground. I saw it too, and there was nothing wrong with my head.” Several of them looked lemon-bit at that revelation. He persisted. “How else do you explain the backlash that knocked out Sovereign’s shields and allowed our fleet to bring it down?”

Quentius twitched. “We investigated the Sovereign incident extensively two years ago. Only about a third of the Alliance pilots reported any such backlash. And that can be easily explained by the rampant rumors after the battle, convincing them of what they saw.”
Councilor Irissa spoke again, each word pointed and precise. “Returning to the matter of the Collectors... We have no idea why they want so many human bodies?”

“They’re taking people alive,” Alenko said, annoyed enough to forget to be nervous. “There’s no reason to go to that trouble if they planned to kill them. Those people could still be in stasis.”

He became aware that Hackett was watching him. Silently, with that same keen penetrating stare, made almost menacing by the long scar under his eye.

Anderson answered as though he hadn’t spoken. “They’ve procured human specimens on a small scale for decades. Cerberus was among their suppliers.”

Quentius shook his head. “If they were allied, why try to stop the attack? Even Alenko’s report doesn’t dispute Cerberus drove the Collectors off-world.”

Hackett shifted his attention to the Council. Alenko let out a quiet, completely involuntary breath of relief.

“Cerberus is comprised of at least three and possibly as many as six highly independent cells,” Hackett said, matter-of-factly. If he had reservations about revealing sensitive Alliance intelligence to alien politicos, it didn’t show. “Their leaders report directly to the Illusive Man and may not even know each other’s identities.”

“They’re being played against each other?”

“Or the Illusive Man wants it to look that way.”

“Who is he?” Asheel asked.

Anderson looked at Hackett. “His identity is unknown. We have several guesses, but no confirmation.”

“I see.” And the way she said it made both her disdain and complete lack of surprise clear. “I am, however, extremely curious how he managed to subvert a spectre.”

Making it just as obvious that she didn’t believe any such subversion had occurred— that Nathaly had chosen to turn her back on the Council and the Systems Alliance alike. A small coal began to smolder where his stomach knot had been, burning through its ropes.

Anderson seemed to feel it, too. His tone grew a touch stiff. “Cerberus evidently collected Shepard’s body from Alchera and... healed her.”

Irissa gave him a very flat look, the kind that could whither fruit on the vine. “You find resurrection more plausible than treason.”

Alenko watched Anderson’s fingers curl into his palm as he answered. “We’ve received information over the past six months indicating Cerberus was researching such technology. In addition, I’ve been acquainted with Shepard since she was a small child. Followed her entire career. She would die before she betrayed the Alliance.”

“And yet, she’s working for terrorists who prey on the Alliance.” Irissa glanced down at a datapad. “There have been reports of a ship very much like the SSV Normandy docked at Omega. I’ve always found it odd that a stealth ship on a recon mission was attacked out of nowhere. As if the assailant knew exactly where to look.”
“Speak plainly,” Anderson said, only just managing not to spit it.

“Maybe Shepard arranged the attack with Cerberus, so they would have the wreckage to study. Goddess knows what else she gave them—”

An ice as cold and distant as the moon filled Alenko. He looked into her face. “There’s a human saying. Those who don’t know, speak.”

The room went deathly silent. Irissa blinked. Even Hackett was startled.

None of it could touch him. Every word dropped hard and flat. “Shepard despised Cerberus. The mere suggestion that she would sacrifice her crew to pass them intel would horrify anyone who ever met her.”

Which, of course, Irissa had not. Her eyes acquired a dangerous sheen. “Councilor Anderson, please restrain your officer.”

But before he could act, Alenko kept going. “She died because she couldn’t stand to leave that ship while members of her crew were still on board. Would you have done that?”

“Only a fool would die like that,” she said, looking down at him, like a challenge. “Or a coward.”

“You don’t really care if she’s working for Cerberus. You just want a convenient political whipping girl for all the things you can’t or won’t control.” He never raised his voice. “So tell me who’s a coward.”

Councilor Asheel added her own angry croak to the fray. “Yes, Anderson, let’s have some order here.”

He gave Alenko a long unreadable look. Then he smoothly turned back to the other councilors. “I find no fault with the commander’s assessment.”

Udina went purple. Irissa’s only reaction was the tiniest of frowns— one that promised retribution. “We’ll continue this another time.”

Then she cut the connection. The holopads fell dark.

An angry murmur rose immediately. Jackson was shooting daggers at him. Anderson just shook his head, looking like he had something to say, but possibly not for this audience.

But Hackett simply held up his hand, forestalling the nascent eruption, and addressed Alenko. Mild as a summer day. “I take it you do believe Cerberus employed means other than honest persuasion to bring Shepard to their cause?”

A hundred pounds of indignation was pouring through his veins, and any nerves were utterly forgotten. “Absolutely. She would never do this.”

“Shepard’s injuries were catastrophic,” Rahimi cut in. “It’s plausible that Cerberus may have resorted to extreme methods, like VI prosthetics, to restore a semblance of mental function.”

One of the black-suited women cleared her throat. Presumably a SAMI official. “We’ve received copies of the Lazarus files as well. We’re troubled that one of our former agents, Geoffrey Farrell, may have been involved in the project. I can assure you Dr. Farrell is open to extreme methodologies to achieve his objectives. In his hands, Shepard could be anything now. Anyone.”
A chill ran through Alenko. But he couldn’t bring himself to deny it. Miranda had vehemently and thoroughly discredited that question, but he knew damn well he wasn’t enough of an expert to judge their work. And Nathaly’s recent choices were not readily explainable.

Hackett looked at Anderson, who shrugged, a bit helpless. “I told you about her visit. She didn’t seem… She was all tangled up in her head, but hell, anyone would be after what she’s been through. She was still Shepard.”

She’d sounded exactly like Nathaly. He could still hear her voice in his ear, excited and happy and overwhelmed as she clung to his shirt. The hurt and confusion when he demanded she explain Cerberus’ presence, and then didn’t leave her any room to do so.

Alenko felt something slowly coming apart inside him, and there was so much chaos in this room, nobody had noticed.

Udina broke in. “This is nothing compared to the political hurricane we’re about to experience. Irissa will remember this, mark my words. She and Asheel will be plotting how to serve our livers by nightfall.”

Anderson rubbed his face. “Start on damage control. You’re good at that.”

For a moment, it looked like Udina would say something ugly, but he stormed off. Possibly hoping Irissa would leave him a kidney to gnaw.

Hackett got back to the point, turning to another admiral. “Putting Shepard aside, we know the scope of the Collector threat. They’re limited to colonies that can’t defeat a cruiser. We have enough ships to provide cover against that. I want the second and third fleets deployed to the Terminus border.”

“Supply chain’s going to look pretty rough.”

“You’ll hack it out. I don’t want forces garrisoned on the ground. Colonies that far out into the Traverse aren’t large enough to support so many uninvited guests, and they’re already seeing refugees.” He turned back to Alenko. “Your report said Cerberus used the GARDIAN defense system to assault the Collector ship. Can I assume the gun is now operational?”

He shrugged, mildly embarrassed and trying to keep his voice steady. “The techs went over the code and discovered the algorithm had been corrupted somehow. Private North from my team applied a patch in real time, and Cerberus completed the hardware calibrations. They said they can wipe the hardware and load a fresh version, but it’d be a shame. Apparently the fixes are better.”

“That’s a thought to keep you up at night.” Hackett raised his eyebrows. “Any chance the same person who set up that jamming tower had access to the code?”

Alenko thought of Messner, but he still had nothing but a gut feel, and that wasn’t enough to condemn a man. But on the other hand… “I can’t rule it out. There was a trader who rubbed me wrong. He could be involved.”

“I’ll want a full description.”

Rahimi spoke. “Horizon’s government is rebuffing our requests to send forensic teams to investigate the tampering, with their comm system or the defense towers.”

Hackett nodded, as if he’d expected that. Rahimi continued, “About Shepard, sir. We can’t just put it aside. Regardless of how she ended up on Cerberus’ payroll, she’s there now. She’s a
walking, breathing intelligence breach on a scale we haven’t seen in twenty years. You have to let us bring her in.”

Alenko blinked. “What?”

At the same time, Anderson shook his head. “She didn’t take her spectre commission back. She won’t want to come.”

Rahimi was incredulous. “It’s not about what she wants. It’s about the security of the Alliance.”

Hackett answered Anderson. “We don’t know that. She saved our agent on Sanctum.”

Jackson spoke up for the first time. “Sanctum is a Cerberus clearinghouse for tech, with the Blue Suns well-situated for distribution. If Shepard picked up something there, it’s worth investigating.”

The admiral raised his eyebrows. She’d surprised him. “Agreed.”

“I asked her to report in,” Alenko cut in, unwilling to let it go. Once again he had the full attention of the room. But this time he didn’t care. He looked from Hackett to Anderson and back. “I asked her. She said it wouldn’t do any good because the Alliance wasn’t going to stop the Collectors.”

“That sounds like Shepard to me,” said Anderson. “Doing whatever it takes. Not a brainwashed Cerberus drone.”

“And who the hell taught her that?” he shot back.

It slipped out without any forethought or conscious intent. Alenko did not, generally speaking, thrive on confrontation. He prided himself on being able to understand a situation from every point of view, on his innate fairness. But he realized as he spoke that he’d been out for blood since Nathaly’s Cerberus shuttle streaked away, and he was long past caring where he got it. Nobody in this room was innocent. Including himself. They should all share in the pain.

“That’s the job,” Anderson growled, a warning.

“The job, or your influence?” He jabbed his finger at Jackson, who tried very hard to disappear. “She’s N7, too. I’ve been working with her for eighteen months. I have never seen her pull the kind of shit Nathaly did.”

Hackett tried to give him an out. “Commander Alenko, it’s abundantly clear to all of us you could use some sleep to clear your head.”

“My head is just fine,” he said, as his headache ratcheted up another notch. His glare swept the room. “But let’s talk about tired. Let’s talk about how goddamn exhausted Nathaly was. In ‘83 she was on the verge of a total breakdown, and not one of you ever noticed, much less gave a crap. For ten years you shuffled her from one mission to the next without a second to breathe, to the point that she felt like just another piece of equipment, and what did you do?”

He was forced to take a breath. Hackett started to speak, but Anderson waved him off, his voice low with barely-suppressed anger. “I don’t know. What exactly did I do, except care for her like my own child?”

“And what was she to me, nothing?” Consequences be damned. This had been a long time coming. “You made her a spectre and you sent her after Saren alone, and you never spared a thought to whether she could take it. You used her up like a thermal clip and spat her into the void
and now you’re surprised Cerberus was able to do this to her? That she didn’t want to come back here and face this inquisition?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Anderson said. “I knew Shepard well. She’s been through hell, but she always came out of it.”

“It was like that.” Alenko was well-beyond any sense of self-preservation. The fallout from the invasion had shredded him. Still reeling from finding her alive, and his worst fears confirmed. Hating that he was still so tied into knots over her, he had nothing left for the colonists who lost their families and their homes and probably all sense of security for the rest of their lives. “And she’d never tell you in a hundred years because she couldn’t bear your disappointment. She’d kill herself for you and was damn well on her way to doing it.”

His face was a thunderhead. “You are way out of line—”

“About that head injury,” he said, perfectly flat. “She got it on Noveria. I’m sure you remember. You could have ordered her to stay back, but instead you kept her in the fight, like head trauma was for wimps, and she spent fifty-two hours after Saren died bleeding into her brain. If she’d died there, that one would be on you.”

In the six months they hunted Saren and the occasional meeting in the two years afterwards, Alenko had never seen Anderson like that. The incipient anger, the defensiveness, had melted away. The man looked stricken. He could’ve heard a pin drop in the room.

Jackson took a deep breath and addressed Hackett. “Sir, with your permission, I quite agree Commander Alenko could use that down time. I’m not certain his report conveyed how harrowing the attack on Horizon truly was.”

He jerked his chin at the hatch. “Go.”

For a long moment, Alenko looked at Anderson, then Hackett. Realized he had nothing more to say, and allowed Jackson to escort him from the room, pausing only to collect his bag. Anderson’s eyes bore into his back.

As they left, he heard Hackett resume the discussion with his aide. “I understand your objections, but Shepard may be more useful where she is. She’s not wrong about the limits of Alliance authority.”

Rahimi made some kind of answer, lost as the hatch slid shut.

Jackson was on him immediately, crowding into him and pointing back at the room. “What the hell was that?”

Now that it was over, gravity was catching up to him in goosebumps and a sudden rush of blood that left him slightly faint. But amid the belated nerves, there wasn’t even a splintered ghost of regret. “I told the truth. That’s why they marched me over here, right?”

“Truth’s not some holy thing, if that was even truth at all. You can’t just deliver it like reading words off a stone.”

“I don’t need a sermon.” He tried to step around her.

Her arm flung out, slamming into the bulkhead and blocking his path. “You need to take hold of yourself.”
“I don’t care—”

“I believe you.” She didn’t budge an inch, hard-faced as she looked up at him. “But you’re gonna care. Eventually. Once you’ve calmed down a mite.”

He fumed at her. She exhaled. “I knew Shepard a bit. Clearly not as well as you.”

Alenko let that jab pass. Jackson said, just as evenly, “We did a training stint together in the Andes. She spent the whole time pitching rocks at the opposite cliff, trying to start an avalanche, just because she’d never seen one.”

“Your point?”

“You don’t have to know Shepard five hot minutes to see she’s crazy.” She gave him a shove. “Think, Alenko. What does crazy hate more than anything?”

“I’m damn sure I don’t know.”

“Control. You really believe the Illusive Man tells Shepard what to do? The galactic Council and all of Alliance Command combined couldn’t tell Shepard what to do! Don’t be a damn fool.”

Alenko stood there a moment, breathing heavily. But saying nothing.

Jackson backed off. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow. Noon latest.”

“Thanks,” he replied, with heavy sarcasm.

Her look was scathing. “The last thing you need right now nothing to occupy yourself. Go do whatever you need to get your head screwed back on tight, get some sleep, come in sober. In the meantime, I’ll do some damage control with Cook and whoever else this crusade of yours set off.”

Then she took off down the hall without a backwards glance.

Alenko ran a hand over his greasy face. He’d been on shuttle flights for the past two days, trying to get home from the Terminus. Had he showered before he left Horizon? It’d been non-stop, dealing with the survivors, trying to make some kind of sense out of all that madness. Everyone had someone missing. Nobody wanted to return to homes with those kinds of holes. Least of all him.

He had to go back to his apartment, to drop off his stuff if nothing else. Never mind that he was supposed to live there together with Nathaly. Right now, that cut way too close to the bone.

But he had nowhere else, so he called a taxi.

The apartment still required a ton of work to be habitable again. All the pictures were still off the walls, his plants were in cereal bowls, and he’d probably end up replacing half the books due to damage. It was shocking how thoroughly destructive Cerberus had been. If nothing else, that convinced him Jackson was wrong about Nathaly being the burglar. She was messy as hell, she’d dog-ear a first edition *Hobbit* without thinking twice, but straight-up destroying a book without good reason… no.

She liked books. Folding them back and dotting them with dribbles of hot chocolate and scrawling in the margins was how she showed her love. Tearing out pages and dumping them open on the floor was just abuse.
He wondered, not for the first time, what Nathaly would’ve added to these shelves. Maybe if he’d been just a little less reactionary back on Horizon, a little more patient… Persuading her to report in couldn’t have been that hard. Even if she wanted to go back to Cerberus afterwards, Alenko refused to believe her sense of duty had abandoned her entirely. But he just had to back her into a corner. Make her recalcitrant.

But damn it, he shouldn’t have had to persuade her on something like that. She should’ve come in herself, first thing, the first chance she got after waking up. He risked everything when Miranda said they could bring her back and he let them try. And now Nathaly was taking their orders.

Alenko rubbed his face. Jackson and Hackett were right. He badly needed rest, and to be clean, and possibly an entirely different life. One that didn’t include plot lines out of a soap opera.

A brief search for clean towels ensued, followed by a struggle to stay upright while he washed, the water pouring down over him until it ran cold. So deep in his thoughts it took three tries to change out his wound dressing for dry gauze. Toweled off, one-handed and barely adequate, and headed down the hall, where he used a quick sweep of his biotics to clear the crap off his bed, remnants of his hasty packing. Then he fell onto the mattress without bothering to turn down the sheets. Fully intending to sleep.

And stared up at the ceiling. Five minutes turned into twenty. Twenty minutes into an hour, his thoughts chasing themselves in dark circles.

Well, if he couldn’t sleep, at least he could work. He snagged his datapad off the nightstand. But before he could do more than unlock it, a recording began to play.

Hi, Kaidan. It’s Nathaly.

A lightning bolt ran through him. He sat up, fumbling at the lamp, and stared down at the screen. The playback bar paused barely into the message. After a long, tremulous moment, he hit play.

I know this comes as a shock, but I’m alive. Cerberus recovered my body and spent two years bringing me back. I’m using their resources to go after the Collectors. They’re behind our colony abductions, and Cerberus can operate in the Terminus.

It was all right there. Everything he accused her of hiding.

It doesn’t seem the Alliance can do much. And I need answers, about what they did me, about how I got here. I doubt you’ll understand. I don’t understand myself, most days. But it’s something I have to do.

Everything he refused to hear when she tried to explain on Horizon.

I want you to know I didn’t break into your apartment. I can’t believe you kept this place. Just walking in like this is rude beyond belief, but I couldn’t help it. I needed to see it for real, just once. Maybe it’s been two years for you. It’s been a month for me, and that’s not nearly long enough to forget what we had, or change how I feel.

She sat here, in this room, maybe exactly where he was sitting now. Talking into this datapad. Talking to him.

I wanted so badly to share this little piece of happiness with you. I guess even that was too much to ask.

Alenko put his face in his hand, the datapad playing on in his lap. Too much to ask. That her
boyfriend might listen to a single word she had to say about Lazarus, or Cerberus, or any other part of what happened before condemning her, too much to ask for an ounce of good faith.

_I hope you don’t mind me contacting you like this. I couldn’t risk something more direct, not while Cerberus has a target painted on your back._

Oh, god. Oh god… she wasn’t avoiding him. She was afraid for him. That by coming back into his life, she’d put him in even greater danger. She contacted him the only way she thought was safe, the first chance she had.

_Take care of yourself. I’m going to try to find out what Cerberus wants. Not sure how far I’ll get. After that… I’d like to see you, if you’ll have me._

_I left contact information on this datapad. It’s your choice. Shepard out._

He sat there for who knew how long, too numb to move. That was the cherry on top. She suspected Cerberus already, and was trying to investigate them covertly. While trying to take out the Collectors with a single squad. While putting her life back together after her literal death.

And all he could do was berate her.

His stomach heaved. Blindly, he set the datapad aside, got up, raked his fingers through his sopping hair. The walls pressed in around him. He couldn’t breathe.

Alenko fled the apartment with barely the presence of mind to dress first, unable to stay there with that damning message a moment longer. Unable to stay alone with his anger and confusion and guilt, at himself, at her, at what Cerberus had done to both their lives.

He hit the street. He wanted lights and noise and people. Anything to push out her voice playing over and over in his head.

Water dripped down onto the collar of his shirt from his hair, wild and curling slightly as it dried, and him too distracted to care. He stuffed his free hand in his pocket and walked, the next several hours passing in a blur as he tried to pound the poison out through his feet. But it wasn’t enough. He never was a violent person, but right then, destruction had a kind of appeal. So when walking failed, he found his way to Shalta Ward, to a casino opened in the past few months by human investors, one that featured human games alongside galactic favorites.

Alenko was extremely good at poker when he cared to exert himself. His rule was to only play with cash, to limit the damage of a bad night, but his pocketful of chits wouldn’t buy him the kind of domination he wanted. Not unless he worked them hard. And Alenko didn’t have many bad nights at this particular game.

It was something to focus on that wasn’t painful. A way to feel in control.

He spent the first hour working a low stakes table without mercy, until he had enough chips to move up. Then it took forty minutes of watching the room, cruising the bar and playing the odd hand, to find the right target— bespoke suit, drinking scotch at a hundred credits a shot, paying with a corporate linkcard. Clearly C-suite and not for a small company. The kind of person used to getting his way, and who probably deserved what Alenko was about to do, based on how he was spending his employer’s funds.

He sat down. The asari dealer looked doubtful, until he set his stash of carefully hoarded chips on the table. Then she shrugged and got on with the game. Probably figuring he’d be out in a hand or three.
From there, things took off exponentially. Around hour two he was moving enough credits that the casino started sending him free drinks. And the executive had stopped enjoying himself quite so thoroughly.

The money wasn’t important. That was just scorekeeping. What mattered was beating the smug son of a bitch sitting across from him, who could easily outspend him a hundred to one, because Alenko was quite simply better at the game and money couldn’t buy luck or talent.

The drinks kept coming. Alenko got less and less polite. Not trash talking, that was too crass, too easy, but in how he played. Throwing down the cards. Smirking. Ruthlessly pursuing each hand. Not reacting when his primary opponent offered his own insults, not even when those insults degenerated into outright abuse and then thinly-veiled rage. Each remark only left him feeling stronger. More superior. He had almost forgotten Nathaly altogether.

Everyone else had dropped out ninety minutes past. By any reasonable standard, his opponent should have done the same. But his pride wouldn’t let him. He swore over his dwindling pile of chips. His cronies hovered nearby, occasionally exchanging harried whispers, but unlike Alenko, they actually were afraid of him. Underlings, then. Every time he barked, they backed off another half-step.

Eventually, one of them hurried off. Seeking support from someone on his boss’ level, maybe, or just reaching his breaking point.

Alenko glanced at his cards. Two jacks. On this round, it was doubtful he’d even have to try.

Instead he sat back and drained his most recent drink. His opponent was smiling, for the first time since Alenko sat down. His brow furrowed. He took another look at the cards on the table, and thought it was virtually impossible for the man to have a better hand.

But the smile kept growing as he noticed Alenko’s confusion. A moment later, a voice spoke behind him. “Sir, we need you to come with us, please.”

He twisted in his seat. Three uniformed security guards stood behind him. His first reaction wasn’t anxiety, or even outrage. It was mystification. “Excuse me?”

Across the table, the executive beamed, his first real pleasure in hours. The guard cleared his throat. “There have been accusations of biotic interference with this game.”

His eyes were fixed on Alenko’s hairline, just behind the temple. The damn implant scar. “How the hell would anyone use biotics to win poker?”

“You’re aware that the use of biotics in any capacity within this establishment is prohibited?”

“But I haven’t used any.” He was still more baffled than angry. This was absurd. “And even if I had, it’s hardly useful for a card game.”

“I agree,” the dealer spoke up, unexpectedly. But then she was asari and a biotic by default. “This is insulting. I would have noticed.”

The guard glanced at her. “Ms. Vanoris, management would like to see you now.”

Her eyes grew hard. The exec hadn’t tipped her even once. She swiped her tips from Alenko and dropped them into a pocket before stalking off.

“Sir, if you’d follow me,” the guard said again, laying a hand on his shoulder.
Alenko shrugged him off. “This is ridiculous.”

They shifted uncomfortably, as if they knew that perfectly well. But their silence spoke volumes. Alenko made a disgusted noise and began gathering up his chips.

The C-suite guy finally spoke. “You’re letting him take his illicit winnings?”

“Unbelievable.” Alenko shook his head and carried on. “You’re throwing me out because you can’t stand losing, and you have the gall to be that petty.”

“I had nothing to do with—”

“Oh, shut up.” He slipped the last chip away. “You’re so far from the worst thing that’s happened to me this week, this is actually hilarious.”

The guard stepped forward. “Sir—”

Alenko kept going. “You should have your yes-men sit down. I imagine it’s easier to win against people who piss their pants every time you look at them.”

He went purple. Alenko shrugged. “But then I guess it’s pretty boring to spend the company’s money against itself. Glad I could make your evening a little more interesting.”

The exec stood. A vein throbbed in his forehead. Alenko experienced a thrill of victory. This was what he came for, that look, right there. That impotent rage that came from losing something he thought was sure, feeling the balance of his world tremble ever so slightly. Nothing compared to the earthquake in Alenko’s world… but it was something.

He couldn’t hide his grim little smile as the guard took him by the arm and began walking him towards the door. Alenko called over his shoulder. “Have fun with the expense report.”

They marched him unceremoniously to the street, where a C-Sec squad car waited. He saw it and blinked. “Oh, you have got to be kidding me.”

The turian officer flexed his mandible. “Use of biotics to commit fraud for financial gain is strictly prohibited by law.”

This was exasperating. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Then you should have no issue proving that.” He took Alenko’s arm with a nod to the security staff.

“At least you could’ve accused me of counting cards!” he yelled at the casino hatch as the officer put him in the car, starting to really feel the complimentary whiskey sours. “Something dignified! And plausible!”

A few people stopped to stare. Alenko gave himself a last annoyed shake and sat down. The canopy closed, and they started to drive.

The nearest station wasn’t in his home precinct, so at least Alenko was spared the indignity of being marched past Bailey’s desk. Instead, a very jaded asari lieutenant took his biometrics. “A repeat customer, I see.”

For a moment, he was confused, before remembering their brief run-in with C-Sec following a gunfight with Saren’s men back in ‘83. It felt like lifetimes ago. “Isn’t there some kind of limit on
how long you can keep data without a crime?”

“Five standard years.”

The room had started to spin gently. He held onto the counter. “ Seems excessive.”

“Not when we see the same people over and over.” She began updating his file to complete his booking. “You all slip up eventually.”

Alenko thought two appearances in two years hardly warranted that kind of cynicism, but at that point, he was passed off to a detective and escorted into the warrens of the station beyond the desk, fumbling over his own feet while the officer made no pretense of patience. They went into a small room with a console, two chairs, and what he immediately recognized even through the whiskey haze as equipment for performing diagnostics on biotic implants.

“How have a seat.” The detective, another turian, gestured at the chair nearest the equipment cart.

Alenko sat with some trepidation, half-missing the seat and grabbing at the back, and tried to sober up fast. His familiarity with Citadel laws didn’t extend quite far enough to immediately understand what the equipment’s presence implied, but he didn’t like it.

The detective flipped to a file on his datapad. “The Solar Paradise Casino called in C-Sec on an accusation of illegal use of biotics to interfere with a game of chance.”

“It was a poker game.” At his blank look, Alenko elaborated, “A card game. I didn’t use biotics, but it wouldn’t have helped if I had.”

Some lone light of intoxication-free thought knew he shouldn’t be talking at all. But this was ridiculous, and by god, he was going to clear this up. “Some high-roller got his jimmies rustled when I beat the pants off him.”

“So you deny the charges.”

“Absolutely.” He tried to bring the man into focus. His image kept blurring into two or three.

The detective sighed, and glanced at the time on his omni-tool. “Well, there’s an easy way to verify your claims.”

He nodded to the equipment. Alenko’s brow furrowed. “I don’t follow.”

“You’re registered as having an L2 implant. According to our records of human implant models, yours stores data regarding its own usage for 25.92 galactic standard hours. We read out that data, show you didn’t engage your biotics, and you’re free to go.”

“How stupid do you think I am?” That was a dash of ice water. Allowing them that kind of access opened his implant for all kinds of potential modifications, and once they were in, he’d have very little recourse to stop them.

The detective glared. “Not quite as stupid as you think we are. You’ll need to call in a witness. We don’t want any accusations of improper conduct, either.”

He sat back, folding his arm over his stomach belligerently. “And if I refuse?”

“Then you can wait in our drunk tank until tomorrow morning when we get a warrant.”

Add in the time to actually perform the procedure, and he’d be late for work for sure. And the last
thing Alenko wanted right now was for the navy to hear anything about this. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let me see if I can get someone.”

“Good choice.” The detective left the room, taking his datapad with him.

Alenko opened his omni-tool and contemplated his contacts list. It took a few minutes to get the letters to assemble into words. Almost every person on it aboard the Citadel was a colleague, which defeated the entire purpose of going through with the procedure. He thought about contracting a lawyer to come in, but trusting a stranger with this, even one versed in Citadel laws, was nauseating, and he wasn’t confident of his ability to navigate an extranet directory at this exact moment.

No, there was only one option. He hit the link and waited, with trepidation.

It was answered by a voice still mostly asleep. “Matsuo.”

Alenko braced himself, and tried to enunciate clearly. “Sorry to wake you. I need a favor.”

“Kaidan?” The sound of bed covers shifting. “What the fuck? It’s one thirty in the morning.”

“Yeah.” In the background, he overheard Alex murmur something, and Mat make some reply.

Mat suppressed a yawn. “Where are you?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m in jail. Sort of.”

“You’re in JAIL?” His voice rose. Alex hissed at him not to wake their daughter; Mat made a shushing sound. Alenko heard footsteps, and then a hatch open and shut. “What happened?”

Alenko gave him the rundown, as succinctly as he could, leaving out events on Horizon. But Mat had known him a long time. “You went to a casino in the middle of the night, and made an ass of yourself. Why?”

He leaned into his forearm, against the wall of the holding room. “Can you help me or not?”

A long, exasperated sigh. “Which station was it again?”

Forty minutes later, Mat walked into the room, escorted by the detective and a technician Alenko hadn’t yet met. Mat folded his arms, ridiculous in a heavy sweater and pajama bottoms, and his face promising a storm.

Alenko attempted peace. “Look, I’m really sorry—”

“You’re drunk as hell.” Flatly. For Mat, that bordered on murderous. “After this is over, we are going to talk.”

The tech began setting up the equipment. The detective clacked his mandible. “Now that your witness is present, we can get on with this.”

Alenko allowed the tech to seat him, though it took every last nerve to not fight it. Mat’s anger faded into uneasiness as the setup progressed, seeing how uncomfortable he was, and twice he almost said something. When the technician combed through his hair and fitted the tool under his amplifier, Mat reached towards him, a completely unconscious gesture. “Just wait a minute—”

“It’s ok,” Alenko said, although it truly wasn’t. He experienced the stomach-turning skitter of discharging energies running down his nerves as the amp parted ways from his implant, exposing
the exterior port. Knowing that he’d spend the next week trying to get it properly calibrated again. Realizing that this particular nausea mixed very poorly with alcohol, and that there was not so much as a trash can in this room.

Completely nonchalant, the tech grabbed a dongle from the cart and shoved it into his implant. Alenko couldn’t stop a small sound escaping his mouth as the feedback rattled through him.

Mat paled and opened his mouth. Alenko grit his teeth. “I explained this over the call. This is all normal.”

Normal. No matter how many times he’d done this, no matter how much he expected it, somehow it never got less jarring. The tech left the dongle hanging from his head, and started fussing with the equipment.

For a moment, his mind went back two years ago, to the Kilimanjaro barely more than an hour after Sovereign fell into the tower and buried them in debris. Nathaly was still deeply unconscious, and the neurologist ordered a shunt installed to drain the excess fluid from her cranial cavity. Every operating theater on the ship was occupied, so they did it right there at her bed. He watched the anesthesiologist administer the nerve blocks. His own head absolutely killing him, but for the first time in his life, the migraine was only a distant consideration as the surgeon began to drill.

The same helpless feeling gripped him now, events sliding out of his control, complete uncertainty about what was happening and whether it would end well. He’d been running from it for nearly five days. It turned out no amount of work, isolation, picking fights, or fixation on being right could stop it forever.

The technician flipped a switch. The dongle began to hum, a tuning fork in his head. Thrumming away as it read down his data. Vibrating his every nerve in the process, because the implant was inextricably linked to the rest of his body. It didn’t like unusual electrical activity.

Mat watched him bite his lip, and stood with his arms crossed, pale and indignant. But he seemed to realize speaking at all would only prolong this.

After a brief eternity, the tech turned in his chair, so the room could better view the terminal screen. “Higher than usual background spikes, but nothing suspicious in the time frame under investigation. No significant biotic activity at all.”

“Background spikes?” the detective asked, as Alenko stared at the output. After fifteen years with his implant, he could read the raw data easily. The scale shouldn’t go that high. Not for background.

“Usually just stress.” The technician shrugged, and plunked an OSD into the terminal. “Sometimes health issues or other problems. Not cheating at a casino.”

“Fine.” The detective gave Alenko a nod. “You’re free to go, with our thanks for your cooperation.”

Alenko yanked the dongle loose— another burst of nausea— and held out his hand for his amp. “I can’t say I’ll be recommending this precinct station to my friends.”

The tech laughed, and then almost choked himself stopping when the detective glared. Mat shifted towards Kaidan. “Alex is going to kill me if I’m not back soon. Let’s get out of here.”

As they emerged onto the street, Alenko said, “That doesn’t sound much like Alex. I’m sorry if I caused you trouble.”
“No, he was worried about you. I just wanted the hell out of that room.” Mat took a deep breath. “All I could think was how the fuck could I possibly know if they did something wrong.”

“You would’ve known.” Alenko was very sure. Either he’d have sensed it and been able to say so, or his inability to speak would have spoken on its own.

They found the taxi stand a half block from the station, and stood there awkwardly, Alenko slotting his amp back into place with a small hiss as Mat tried to look anywhere else. After it stopped jolting, Alenko took a breath, and spoke. “Thanks for coming. It was a lot to ask, but I didn’t have anyone else to call.”

Mat just rolled his eyes, and turned to the kiosk to call a cab. “How many have you had?”

“What?”

“Drinks. Getting arrested may have sobered you up some, but you smell like a broken bottle.”

“The casino sent me a few gratis.” The chips clattered in his pockets as he shifted from foot to foot, not meeting his eyes.

“A few.” His doubt plain. “Have you eaten anything?”

Alenko scratched his head. Mat was exasperated. “Alright. You’re coming home with me. You can sleep on our couch.”

That only made his guilt worse. “I couldn’t possibly impose—”

“I’m not offering you a choice.” The cab arrived. “Get in.”

As the canopy closed and the car took flight, Mat looked over at him. “So. What is this about?”

He slumped into the seat. “I just got back from deployment.”

“I guessed that from the sling.” Mat’s brow furrowed. “Where were you posted?”

He considered lying. And that, ultimately, was why he answered truthfully, because if he felt driven to dishonesty with one of his oldest friends, maybe everyone was right and he did need to talk about this. “Horizon.”

“Horizon?!” Mat sat up straight. “You’re shitting me. That was you? It’s been all over the news.”

“It’s never a single person, Mat.” He felt very tired. “I had help.”

“You know, it’s never been a safe or comfortable career, but something happened to you the past few years. You’ve wound up in these situations. Do you have some kind of death wish?”

It seemed impossible to explain. “I… Look, you can’t understand this. Most people can’t. But this is what I wanted, all of this, when I signed up. I wanted the adventure—”

“Adventure.” He snorted and crossed his arms.

“I wanted to help people. And it is… exciting. And terrifying, exhausting, and exhilarating. There’s nothing like it in the world.” He searched for words. “There’s a… a bond, that comes from sharing that with the people who go through it with you. It pushes you to go further and further. To keep them safe, to not let them down.”
“And die with them.”

“We try to avoid that.”

“It’s not a no.”

Alenko didn’t reply. Mat made a sound of disgust and threw himself back against the seat, opening his omni-tool. Presumably warning his husband they were inbound.

When they arrived, they exited the cab in that same measured silence and boarded the elevator. Alenko cleared his throat. “There’s something else. I mentioned I had help.”

Mat raised his eyebrows, and waited for him to go on. The elevator dinged. The hatch was only a few paces away. As Mat opened the door, Alenko said, “Nathaly was there.”

The look he got for that was utterly exhausted, and no little defeated. “You need help, man.”

That rankled. Alenko followed him into the living room. “I don’t mean I glimpsed her through a battlefield haze. I mean I talked to her after it was all over.”

Alex emerged from a hallway, his arms full of linens. The polar opposite of his spouse, tall, blonde, and broad, with a lingering trace of a Swedish accent. “Talked to who?”

Mat ignored him entirely. He stepped up, got in Kaidan’s face, glaring up at him. Their height difference would have made it comical if not for the deadly look in Mat’s eyes. “Is it happening again?”

Alenko was honestly baffled. “What?” Then the other shoe dropped. “No. God. How many times—”

Mat crossed his arms. “So if I go search your apartment, I’m not going to find a little baggie filled —”

“No,” he said, louder, more annoyed. He brushed past him, stalking into the living room.

“Poker was how you used to fund it— there was always game going somewhere near campus. And drinking heavily was how you’d cover it up,” he continued, not dissuaded. “And now you’re apparently hallucinating Shepard, so you can see how I might be dubious.”

Alex cut in, before Alenko could make a biting reply. “Can someone please tell me what is happening?”

Mat gestured at Kaidan, disgusted. “He just got back from Horizon, where he apparently had a conversation with his corpse girlfriend—”

“Mat!” Alex was shocked.

“I don’t care, it’s true, and we’ve danced around it for two years.”

Alenko rubbed his face. Then he sank into a chair. “I can explain.”

Alex set aside the bedding and sat on the couch. “We’ve got all night.” Then, as Mat opened his mouth, “And I’m sure we’d all like to have a productive conversation.”

He patted the cushion beside him. Mat sat in a huff, but stayed silent. Waiting.
Kaidan wasn’t inclined towards a productive conversation himself. But they really showed up for him tonight. Really, they’d done a lot to show up for him over the past two years, while he tried to pull himself back together. “Collectors attacked Horizon. I brought down down the jamming tower that caused the comm blackout that enabled the invasion. The rest was Nathaly.”

Alex sat forward, avidly. “So what did she say?”

Mat stared in disbelief. “You’re skipping right over the she’s been secretly not dead part?”

“Boring,” he scoffed.

“Boring?!”

“Boring, for a spectre.” Alex waved him off. “Besides, Kaidan’s not exactly ecstatic.”

Mat cocked his head at Alenko. “Come to think of it, why aren’t you happier?”

He massaged his eyes. “I’m not upset that she’s alive.”

“But you are upset about something.” His curiosity soured into outrage. “You already knew.”

There seemed no way around it. And Alenko was starting to feel like he might choke on all the secrets. “It starts about a month after she died.”

As briefly as he could, he explained about Liara searching for Nathaly’s body, and ultimately handing it off to Cerberus. By then, Mat had calmed down. “What’s Cerberus?”

“Bad news. A fringe group, mostly interested in using violence and illegal research to advance a campaign of human supremacy.”

Alex shared a glance with his husband. “I don’t understand. Why on Earth would they want to bring an Alliance officer, a spectre, back to life?”

Mat pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can’t believe that sentence was just spoken aloud.”

“I have no idea.” And that was the truth, even now. Alenko settled back in the chair, exhausted beyond measure, and then winced as the edge of a poker chip dug into his thigh. He began to unload his winnings onto the coffee table.

“This isn’t adding up—” Alex blinked. “That must be five grand in chips.”

“Closer to eight,” he said, absently. “Look, I can’t fathom their motivations. But I know the Lazarus Project was real.”

“Through work?”

“Yes.” He leaned forward on his knees, and ran his hand over his face. “And because I visited the project last February.”

Even Mat was shocked into silence by that. Alex rose and went to the sideboard, reaching for a bottle. Mat cleared his throat. “I think he’s had enough.”

“I want a drink,” he corrected, gently. He put some ice in a glass and brought the vodka back to the table.

As he poured, Alenko said, “I saw Nathaly there. Cerberus had her laid out like… like…”
And though he’d said it many times, to Liara, to Garrus, to himself, the weight of the past week and the whole motherfucking two years before that came crashing down on him, and he couldn’t continue. Silently, Alex passed him the glass, and Mat made no objection.

He took a sip, not even caring that it was vodka, and set it down. “You know, she was injured, really badly, during the Battle of the Citadel. She sat semi-conscious in med bay for two days. And whenever she’d wake up, she’d just be… panicking, almost. No idea where she was or how she got there. Nathaly never panics.”

Kaidan could feel himself sitting there bodily, wedged onto her bed, dreading the next time she woke up and terrified there wouldn’t be a next time. His hand went to his mouth. He couldn’t look at his friends. “And every time she’d come back up, I’d have to tell her, she was aboard the Kilimanjaro, the ship was fine, Liara was fine, I was fine, because she was so distraught.” He took a breath. It caught. “And then I saw her laid out in that Cerberus lab and I just… I just… she was alive. She had brain activity. What if she woke up and there wasn’t anyone there to explain what happened? What if she was just by herself, in that clean room?”

There was a long moment of silence. Mat rose. “I’ll… I’ll get you some water.”

He stalked to the kitchen. Alex turned away, stifling a yawn and trying to disguise it. It was now nearly three AM. Alenko ran his hand over his hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t’ve let Mat talk me into coming back here.”

Alex looked him up and down. “I’m glad you did.”

Mat returned, baring a glass, and looking somewhat more composed. “Drink.”

He raised it to his mouth, embarrassment making him obedient. Once the water touched his tongue, dehydration kicked in, and he swallowed half the glass in one gulp.

“Alright,” Alex said, as Mat settled back into the couch. “This is absolutely the last time I ask, or I’m throwing you out. What did she say?”

“She’s just so… Nathaly, sometimes.”

Alex nodded. “Good, good.” And then, at their looks of reproach, “If she was dead, of course it’s reassuring that she should behave like herself.”

“She stayed with Cerberus.” He shook his head. “That’s not at all like her. She hated them.”

“They saved her life,” Alex pointed out.

“They killed her entire platoon on Akuze. Would you forgive that? Would anyone?” Alenko couldn’t keep the forlorn note from his voice. “And she wouldn’t even discuss coming ho— back to the navy, I mean.”

Six weeks with no word. Being so angry about it for the last four days, all but shoving her away on Horizon, he was so furious. Then finding that datapad on his bed.

Kaidan slapped the glass off the table. It shattered, spilling vodka and ice across the floor. He buried his head in his palm.
Before anyone could do more than stiffen with shock, there was a shuffling from the hallway. “Papa?”

A little girl, four years old, stood at the entrance to the living room, rubbing her fist into her cheek, heavy with sleep. Alex shot him a dark look before getting to his feet.

“I heard a big noise,” she complained, reaching for his hand.

“We only dropped a glass,” he soothed. “Let’s go back to bed.”

Alex began walking her back down the hall. She looked over her shoulder. “Why is Uncle Kaidan here?”

“You can ask him in the morning.”

They disappeared into her bedroom. Alenko turned to Mat, with genuine remorse. Even a trace of shock at his own actions. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“What, be drunk in my apartment in the middle of the night?”

He sank back into the chair and adjusted the sling. “Yeah. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Look,” Mat said, after a long moment of uncomfortable silence. “I only met Shepard for about ten minutes. But I’ll go out on a limb and guess you don’t get to be a special forces commando, spectre, savior of the goddamn Alliance, and be a completely uncomplicated person.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“She probably knows how you feel about Cerberus—”

“How I feel?” He was in disbelief. “You don’t know the half of it. In ’83, we found labs full of human subjects, some of them children—”

“And you think she’s not even a little conflicted about that?” He raised his eyebrows. “No offense, man, but you do tend to run towards absolutes.”

It was what Nathaly said, if somewhat less scathingly. His face heated.

“And being raised from the dead would mess with anyone,” Mat went on. “I’m just saying, maybe consider she already had more than she could really handle, without managing you, too. Maybe sometimes people have to put themselves first.”

He shook his head. Mat looked at him. “What.”

“I’m just…” He let out a breath. All disbelief. “She never puts herself first. She almost died chasing Saren more times than I can count.”

“Well, technically…”

It took him a second to realize Mat was making a joke. A second longer to start laughing. “God, she never wanted to die like that. Hooked up to machines for two years. She said she’d rather be shot.”

“You said she was in the hospital for ages after the Battle of the Citadel. Alex had something like that once. A piece of loose masonry clocked him on the temple at a worksite. Around the twentieth time I answered the same questions, I went off on him for not wearing his hardhat and the
nurse sent me out to get some air.” He cleared his throat. “I cannot imagine being with someone who is at constant risk like that. It’s a hell of a thing. Don’t be so hard on yourself for reacting badly, because honestly, this is a lot.”

It was meant to restore some normalcy. Surprisingly diplomatic, coming from Mat. But Alenko felt abruptly far away, back aboard the Kilimanjaro, enveloped in the post-battle med bay chaos. Nathaly, Amazonian in stature, looking small in that hospital bed with machines arrayed around them.

“She kept asking where I was.” Slow, distant. Still seeing that other time. “Half the time, she was so out of it she didn’t know I was there. Just over and over again, for hours, waking up and pleading with anyone who’d listen that she needed to tell me…”

He trailed off. Hearing her distress, her urgency, even wrapped in a thick layer of sleepiness, every time she woke up enough to speak.

Mat was trying to get his attention. “Kaidan?”

He rubbed at his eyes. “Sorry. I’m tired. My implant’s acting up after that mess.”

“You completely disappeared for a moment there.” His concern plain.

Alenko supposed this whole night probably looked pretty bad to someone else. He tried to think how to explain. “She’d wake up, barely conscious, and it was just where’s Kaidan, I have to tell Kaidan I love him, over and over and over…” His hand went to his mouth. He couldn’t look at him. “It was always there, under the surface. But she couldn’t say it.”

Mat was giving him a stare like he was the dumbest person aboard the station. “Shepard literally couldn’t talk about her feelings for you in the absence of a brain injury, and you really expected her to be capable of dealing with the present situation like an adult?”

His face went red. “I… kind of jumped down her throat.”

“It’s been a few days. She’ll have cooled down.”

He had his doubts. Nathaly never forgot a grudge. “I don’t think you know her that well.”

“Sleep this off, then tell her you’re sorry tomorrow, and we’ll see who’s right.” Mat stood. “Clean up the glass, and I’ll make up the couch.”

As they began, Mat said, “Don’t think this means I’ll ever let you live down getting arrested for cheating at cards. I always suspected. Nobody’s that good.”

That time, he got the joke straight off, and chuckled despite himself. “Believe or not, that wasn’t my worst performance today.”

Mat raised his eyebrows. Alenko told him about the fiasco in front of the Council. And in light of everything, it was so absurd, he wasn’t even upset, and Mat tried vainly not to laugh. “Once the embassies hear you can shut the Council up, they’re going to be all over you.”

“Who knows? After the rest of it today, I might need the job.” But he said it with humor.

His friend shook his head. “I don’t know whether to wish you luck. Every time you get within a few meters of this woman, you lose your mind.”
That… seemed uncomfortably accurate. Kaidan went pink. “It’s a good kind of nuts. Mostly.”

Mat snorted, but made no further reply as they finished up. He turned down the light and headed to bed. Alenko lay awake, exhausted and good mood fading, piles of poker chips and the vodka bottle looming in the darkness. His thoughts returning to that night in the hospital.

The worst of it came right after Saren died, when he saw the blood coming from her ear and she collapsed. The mad rush from the tower to the one shuttle Anderson could coerce into retrieving them, almost losing sight of her when they got to the dreadnought and the orderlies rushed her to med bay. The complete uncertainty, whether she’d live, whether she’d still have a mind left.

At some point, dead on his feet, Kaidan simply laid down beside Nathaly in her hospital bed, soothing her back to sleep when she woke, groggy and confused as ever.

Stroking her hair. Talking to her, because she got distressed if nobody responded to her rambling, and because he needed it, too. He told her that he hadn’t said it either, not for a long time, not when he should have.

He hadn’t said it on Feros, the morning after the party when he first realized he was love with her, but didn’t want to admit it, even to himself— because it was never going to work. Not when he gave her the cupcake for her birthday on Noveria. She’d been pissed at him the whole week prior, which confused him at the time, but now he didn’t half wonder if she was starting to catch on. Nathaly always hated complications.

And he hadn’t said it when she fell off the gantry aboard the Cornucopia. He was so happy she survived he completely forgot to be angry that she’d lied to him. Instead he gave her his helmet, to try to protect her against the absolutely negligible risk of the airlock. Because he couldn’t stand even the slightest risk of losing her.

He hadn’t said it when he saw her standing on Horizon, hands crammed up against her mouth, and the entire world disappeared.

How much of this was his hurt and anger, and how much was his own guilt that he hadn’t been able to save her from Cerberus? Was that fair to her?

Because that mess on the ground during the Battle of the Citadel was always how it went. Nathaly would do something incredibly dangerous, or impossible to understand, or just plain frustrating, he’d get upset, and then in the aftermath it always felt like making mountains out of molehills. He wasn’t going to change her. And apparently nothing she did would change how they felt about each other.

And in truth, he loved that inscrutable wildness about her. That part that didn’t answer to anyone and only did what she thought was right at any given moment. Would he really want to change that?

She challenged him in ways that made him want to tear his hair out— that was nothing new. But Nathaly also left him electrified. Like every taste and color in her proximity was that much more vivid.

All he’d wanted to do for the past two years was kiss her, and for all the wrong that happened afterwards, that moment had been exactly right.

Alenko lay on the couch, staring up into the darkness, until light appeared at the curtains of the apartment and he was able to make his apologies, and get away.
The Day Shepard Woke Up

September 2185

Twenty-four hours after they left Horizon, Shepard went to see Mordin Solus in the Normandy’s lab.

They were still in the Shadow Sea, albeit in a distant solar orbit, not far from the relay. Shepard ordered them pulled back in deference to the Alliance presence on Horizon, and here they had remained.

Mordin brightened as he looked up from a complex tangle of wiring. “Shepard.”

She made an effort to sound upbeat. “You wanted to see me?”

His eyes narrowed. “Baggy skin. Red in the sclera. Getting enough sleep?”

“I’ll manage.” She was accustomed to going without sleep. Kaidan stopping just short of calling her a traitor was less routine. But she’d showered a couple of times, and being clean made it easier to face just about anything.

There was probably something wrong with her that she wasn’t disturbed by the invasion itself. Certainly the colony was in shambles, and not just because they’d lost half their workforce. They were in contact now. Once Shepard explained who she was, any number of officials were eager to share their data—apparently Horizon had been listed as a prime target for a geth attack in ’83. Well, so had a lot of colonies. She couldn’t remember all their names.

Either Mordin could read humans better than he let on or he was too involved with his work to care, because he straightened and got right to the point. “Glad you’re here. Would appreciate your perspective. Investigating Collector implants.”

She peered down at the lab bench. Mordin had two of the Collector devices arrayed. One presumably taken from Garrus’ stronghold, and one identical to it taken from Horizon. Both of them were lit up like Christmas trees. Letters skittered across them in yellow and green light, giving their oily surfaces an iridescent sheen.

Shepard reached for one, and stopped just short of her fingers brushing against it. “So they are implants?”

Mordin nodded. His enthusiasm was jarring to her. Every few minutes for the past day, Shepard got an overwhelming urge to put her hands over her ears and scream until she was hoarse. But it wouldn’t help, so she kept going as though everything were perfectly nominal.

He gestured at the devices. Here and there, he had connected wires, running to a pair of haptic screens hovering at the end of the bench. “Proximity activated unusual response. Have quarantined the outboard signals from leaving this lab. Collector interest undesirable.”

Her brow furrowed. “They’re sending messages?”

“Most implants take energy from the body. But these had a separate store, very clever. Woke up as soon as I put one beside the other. Kept them powered, interested to see if they synced up.”

She frowned, fighting an impulse to touch either of them. Though naturally a tactile person, the
draw was nearing a compulsion. Shepard didn’t like it. “So they’re talking to each other. Why? Did the Collectors have multiple implants per individual?”

Mordin shrugged. “Garbage data mostly. Keep hoping for a coherent signal, any sign of implants’ purpose.”

“Garbage?” She glanced at the screen. “I’m no tech, but they’re clearly trying to network to each other.”

His inner lids flicked upwards in confusion. Shepard reached for one of the terminals and turned the screen towards him. “See, right there. That’s a ping. Right?”

Mordin leaned towards the screen, scrutinizing the data, more and more baffled. “Random collection of characters. No intelligible meaning.”

She stared at it a moment longer, and then let out a breath as she realized what was happening. “Fuck. It’s because they’re Protheans.”

His mouth thinned, disapproving. “I find that hypothesis highly questionable.”

“Look, two years ago I saw a message from a Prothean beacon about the destruction of their civilization. A few months after that, I got an assemblage of thousands of years of their endemic cultural knowledge from a fungal lifeform downloaded into my head.” She ignored his increasing concern, and grabbed a nearby datapad and a stylus. “I know what I’m talking about. It’s supposed to look like this.”

The cipher was always problematic. If she tried to think about it directly, mine it for information, it disappeared, like a star vanishing into the blind spot of her eye. But if she just let it happen…

Her hand moved across the screen, writing a series of letters from no language known to this cycle. “Prothean communication was very weird. I think written words were kind of a last resort, and that’s why the output you’re seeing is so scrambled, even forgetting that it’s using a salarian script.”

She finished and slid the datapad towards him. He stood over it, tapping his chin as he examined her work. “Does resemble a network protocol. Hard to believe—hmm. Why do implants in separate individuals need to communicate? What function does it serve?”

“Maybe they’re tracking devices?” she hazarded.

“Certain Collectors exhibited unusual behavior. Transforming into biotic-capable units, almost on command.”

“Just like Sovereign did with Saren.” Shepard looked back at the devices. “He had a lot of custom cybernetics, too.”

Only just managing not to touch her own scars as she stared down, Mordin’s warning about their strange design looming in her mind. But that was ridiculous. Even Cerberus knew better than to bargain with reapers. As if reapers would ever deign to give people they regarded as no better than farm animals anything of real value.

On impulse, Shepard reached out and picked up the nearest implant. It shivered across her skin on contact, its surface cold and dry and yet somehow oil-slick. It stirred…

You are bacteria. Irrelevant. Pitiful. Surrender your form to us.
As the words sounded in her skull, a jolt of lightening raced up her arm. She dropped the implant like a viper. It clunked onto the bench and rolled several inches until the wires Mordin affixed arrested its movement.

Shepard stared at it, wildly. Her hand flexed. Every nerve still trembling.

Mordin blinked at her. “What is it?”

It felt like an hour had passed, though it couldn’t have been longer than a few seconds. Her heart racing like she’d just run a sprint uphill. A dry tongue scraped over her lips. “You didn’t hear that?”

“No auditory signals detected. Strange burst of dark energy.” He pointed to the screen. “New reaction. You… woke it up?”

“It spoke to me.” She’d heard a voice like that before. “Are there ways to block dark energy?”

“Weak current run through metallic mesh container. Simple to set up.” He tilted his head, scrutinizing her face. “Recall you said biotic Collectors spoke to you.”

Shepard shook her head. She couldn’t look at him. It felt like her every vein was filled with ice. “No. It sounded like Sovereign. There’s a reaper in this somewhere, and it’s using these things to control Collectors.”

It all made the worst kind of sense. If anything had survived of the Prothean race, the reapers had fifty thousand years to learn every last secret. Every button, and every string.

“Husks proof of reaper involvement,” Mordin said. “Thought reapers confined to dark space. Even with comm buoys, signal lag significant for direct control.”

Her eyes narrowed. That was as privileged as information got, and the Council had outright denied all claims. “Anderson mentioned Sovereign’s wreckage got hauled off in bits and pieces. Any chance STG got part of it?”

He glanced away, evasive. “Not my specialty.”

“That’s not a no.” She folded her arms. “I’m no spook, but I know enough not to ask unless it’s really important.”

He nodded. “Will see what I can do.”

She spared the evil things another glance. Rubbing her hand, which continued to twinge. “Anything else about them?”

Mordin tilted his head. “Strange residue. Traces of nanomachinery. Defunct, or would have quarantined in a negative-pressure box. No telling the damage if active nanites let loose on ship.”

“Nanites.” She was baffled. “Why?”

He shrugged, elegantly. “Collector physiology highly unusual. Incompatible with life. Perhaps aided in their sustainment. Certainly responsible for cleaning up corpses. Nanites programmed to dissolve remains, possibly to prevent study.”

Shepard recalled the Collectors fading into ashes, like husks. Maybe they were husks, Prothean husks, rather than human. Anything was possible. “You’re remarkably calm about all this.”
That won her a smile, and for a moment, she forgot to feel horrible. His enthusiasm was that infectious. “Hardly my first time working on something dangerous. Completed thesis on multi-generational genetic impact of industrial toxins. On site during fungal infection causing rapid neurodegeneration. Mixed results, prophylactics effective, cure not, colony evacuated.” He blinked, a quick upward flick of his inner lids. “Also studied evolution of genophage.”

That startled all the fleeting warmth out of her. “The what?”

His eyes shifted away. A trace of something there she couldn’t read. He busied himself with his work, his tone carrying the same zeal. “Krogan known to have robust adaptive response. High genetic variance, nearly as high as human. Requires careful monitoring.”

“The krogan are evolving away from the genophage?” That was one hell of a secret, if that was true. Her thoughts immediately went to Wrex. He was so brusque, but there was an underlying despondency that colored his every word about Tuchanka.

“Genophage a virus,” Mordin explained. “Attaches to krogan DNA, transmitted through mothers to embryos. Original infection rate one hundred percent. Had to be. But, some krogan showing signs of immunity. Not unexpected.”

Shepard didn’t believe anything could make her feel good anymore. The past six weeks had been nothing but one black moment after another. “That’s fantastic.”

“Surprised to hear you say so.” Mordin seemed genuinely taken aback. “Population explosion disastrous for krogan. Recall krogan destroyed their civilization through nuclear war. Might have destroyed galaxy if rebellions unchecked.”

“Humans almost destroyed our own planet a hundred fifty years ago through industrial waste.” Shepard sat back on her heel. “I’m glad nobody thought that offense was worth killing our children for generations to come.”

A muscle twitched in Mordin’s jaw. “Pure hyperbole. Genophage never killed a single child. 99.99% of embryos never viable to start with. Brain fails to develop.”

“Do you think that distinction matters to their parents?”

“Again, projection.” His hand made a sweeping, negating gesture. “Krogan families not at all like human. Or salarian, or asari. High mortality among offspring typical before genophage.”

She decided to let it lie. Her energy didn’t need to be wasted on this sort of argument just now. “Moot point, anyway. Evolution’s going to have its say.”

His eyes flicked to hers, just a moment. “Excuse me. Must finish preparing these specimens. Exploring new avenue to swarm evasion, very promising.”

Leaving the lab after that bit of good news was like exiting an airlock onto a lifeless moon. As little as she wanted to think about those oddly talkative implants, it beat confronting the nominal enemies aboard her own ship. She worked hard to keep her mask up. But every time someone asked for her attention on anything, at every glimpse of that black-and-orange logo, it bubbled away in her mind.

*They tried to kill Kaidan.* It sprang from that dark, primitive place inside her, the one that could not abide complexity and urged her towards things she knew from long experience she would regret. The one that believed everything could be solved by violence alone. That violence could make her safe and happy.
The place still full of incandescent rage obliterating any trace of coherent thought every time she remembered the Illusive Man explaining, oh so causally, how he set the Collectors on Kaidan.

And to that place, that shadow of herself, it didn’t matter that these people had nothing to do with that decision. It didn’t matter that they were her crew, under her protection, beholden to her orders. Or that debate about the Illusive Man’s actions was running rampant through the ship, in whispered huddles and shouting matches—that regardless of opinion, not one person here was completely comfortable with what had happened. Shepard was just as happy she didn’t know who stood where. With those impulses so close to the surface, a part of her was looking for any excuse.

The worst of it was her rational self knew this wasn’t real, that she didn’t really want to kill every Cerberus member on board. Of course she didn’t. What she wanted was to hurt and scare the Illusive Man as badly as he’d hurt her.

There were several people aboard who might understand how to get under the Illusive Man’s skin, satisfy this desire to enact revenge and secure her own safety. But only one shared her needs.

Shepard went down to the lower cargo bay below engineering.

It felt roomier without all the crates of supplies. Jack had installed a sheet of thick plastic across several pipes for a makeshift bench. God alone knew where she got it. Her head jerked up as Shepard entered—jumpy, probably because the arrangement put her back to the stairs. That meant whatever was happening on that bench, Jack really wanted it, to leave herself exposed like that.

“At ease,” Shepard said, drawlingly sarcastic. Expressing any kind of concern for Jack’s vulnerabilities, even by ignoring them, was exactly the wrong tack.

She relaxed a hair. “Wondered when you’d wander your ass back down here.”

“Tell me what you’ve found in the Cerberus databanks.” She didn’t bother with preamble, and she didn’t make it a request. Jack would rankle at either.

All she got for that was a hard look. “What are you hoping I’ll say?”

“Of all people on this ship, I shouldn’t have to bullshit with you.” Shepard folded her arms and leaned against the small bit of bulkhead exposed in this maze. “But if it’ll help, I’ll tell you the Illusive Man poses a clear and present danger to civilization and it’s my job to take care of things like that.”

“I thought you kicked the spectre gig.” But the cynicism hid a pensiveness. Jack turned around and crossed her arms over her belly. “If you want him to bleed, why the hell are we sitting on our hands in the middle of nowhere?”

“I’m waiting for something I expect to happen,” she said, honestly. Not mentioning that she was hoping like hell to be wrong. “Do you have what I need or not?”

“If I did, do you think I’d still be here?” She raised her two immaculately shaped eyebrows. “I know his real name. Have you to thank for that.”

“I don’t follow.” Shepard wouldn’t keep calling him by his self-chosen pretentious title if she had an alternative.

“Thirty years ago he was a mercenary called Jack Harper. Your guy Saren captured him during the First Contact War.” She shrugged. “Some Alliance general traded a shit ton of prisoners to get him back. A little tidbit in the news after Saren decided to start tearing into Alliance colonies. I
put it together with a few other things.”

Her brow knit. “General Williams?”

“Might’ve been. Why?”

“I knew his granddaughter.” Ash had a protectionist streak, but nothing like Cerberus. It didn’t make sense. “And after that Harper just disappeared?”

“Pretty much.” She hung her thumbs in her pockets. “You want to shank his kidney, you’ve got a dozen ways to do that right here. Don’t know why you’re asking me.”

But she’d thought about that. Far more than she’d care to admit. Even if she did surrender all sense of sanity and actually harm somebody aboard ship, the Illusive Man wouldn’t give a damn. He thought people were disposable and wasn’t susceptible to that kind of wound.

But he realized that was exactly what would cut Shepard deepest. She hated that, too. “He thinks more like you than he does like me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“People are equipment. A means to an end.”

Something ugly crossed Jack’s face. She turned back to her workbench. “You don’t know shit.”

“I got a look at your rap sheet before we picked you up. It’s not the record of someone who values life.”

“And what the fuck does yours look like? You think it’s any different because you feel bad about it sometimes?” She snorted, her hands continuing to work. Shepard still couldn’t make out the project. “I’ll tell you a story. Years back, I was in a cult. Looking for answers. Drugs, and sex, and going to a better place. Sure. All they wanted was to suck one colony after another dry and guess who was supposed to be their inside track? That’s real life.”

Talking to Jack was exhausting. “They used you, so you use everyone else.”

“Simpler that way.”

She shook her head and made for the stairs. “Let me know if you find something.”

But as her foot touched the first riser, Jack spoke again, without turning around. “I looked up your boy. Alenko.”

Shepard paused. “Why?”

“Boredom. Curiosity. To screw with you.” Jack couldn’t have sounded more disinterested if she tried. And Shepard suspected she was, in fact, trying. “Found a few old news vids. Didn’t know the Alliance raised kids in research labs.”

Shepard looked over her shoulder, eyes narrowed. “They don’t. BAaT was a mistake.”

“Easy for you to say.” Something extra spiteful lurking there. “Now you both take money from the people who fucked you over. Guess you have that in common. Nice foundation for a relationship.”

An acerbic repartee rose on her tongue, but she bit it back. Because as provocative as she meant to
be, Jack wasn’t wrong. Not entirely—just in nuance. “He told me once that he might as well get paid for it.”

Jack actually laughed. A short, biting, humorless *hah*, but a laugh nonetheless. “Believe me, I intend to get paid.”

Nothing else was forthcoming, so Shepard mounted the stairs, and returned to the CIC to resume her vigil.

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“This is useless,” Joker groused, gesturing at the relay out the port. From about five AU off, it was a spark of bright blue, almost like a star. “We’re just sitting here, logging relay traffic. That’s not even recon. That’s clerical.”

Shepard rubbed at her hip through her jeans. Four days of this had her crew cranky, and all the bruises she collected on Horizon were starting to present their bills. Where she’d fallen off the roof was the worst of it; she woke up so stiff that morning she practically crawled to the shower.

It wasn’t fun. But at least the aches were familiar, almost like this was still her body after all. And nothing brought home that a mission was underway like getting banged up.

“Look,” she said, trying not to sound as irritated as her pilot. “Have I ever asked you to do anything that was completely pointless?”

He opened his mouth. Shut it. Grit his teeth. “No.”

“Then why is it so damn hard to extend me a few days of good faith?”

“I don’t know, Commander. Maybe because it comes right after you ordered me to take our ISR frigate up against an offensive cruiser?”

She had. Shepard scratched her head. “Yeah. I… panicked, just a little.”

“Shepard?”

Joker never called her that. “What?”

“Get your head on straight. Talk to somebody. Seriously, the crew will hold a damn bake sale.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, staring out at the relay spark.

They stayed like that another minute or two, Joker fussing over the ship’s console, Shepard standing to his right and unconsciously massaging her bruised hip, before the silence started pricking away at him. “Can’t you even give me a hint?”

“Kaidan thought the Collectors had human support on the ground. A saboteur.” That was the most she was willing to say about it. Until she was sure.

“Sure, he got that out in between berating you.” Joker made a face. “What kind of guy gets pissed his long-lost girlfriend is alive after all?”

“It wasn’t about that,” she said, tiredly. Every time she thought about their argument, every last cell in her body sagged with exhaustion. Shepard had rarely felt so defeated in her life. She couldn’t begin to untangle it. They had to talk, but pushing had never once worked with Kaidan. And Shepard didn’t know how not to goad.
She’d been in enough failed relationships to recognize the end when it stared her in the face.

“You’d think the his-girlfriend-is-alive part would crowd out the she’s-working-for-terrorists part for a few hours, at least.”

It wasn’t about that, either. Shepard sank into the copilot couch, wrapping her arms around herself and putting her feet up on the console, right through one of the holographic screens. Kaidan said he couldn’t recognize her; small surprise, when she could barely recognize herself. “It’s my fault. I can’t tell up from down anymore.”

That only incensed him. He swiveled his chair towards her. “It is not your fault.”

She blinked, startled by his intensity, but before she could form a reply, Kelly joined them on the bridge. “There you are.”

The interruption was beyond welcome. Shepard tilted her head up until her yeoman entered her field of view. “What do you need?”

Kelly held out a datapad. “Just a few approvals.”

Shepard took it and started scanning through the reports. “What’s wrong with this roster?”

“I advised Operative Lawson to temporarily remove Crewman Patel from non-essential duties.” As the executive officer, ensuring all necessary functions aboard ship were performed was Miranda’s responsibility. Aside from their individual areas of expertise, the whole crew pitched in to perform general maintenance, cleaning, and the like.

Shepard had not been particularly distraught to give up that duty when she succeeded Anderson as commanding officer of the SR-1. “Why are we letting Patel off the hook?”

“She has… had family on Horizon.” Kelly cleared her throat. “I understand working is your way of getting through things, but not everyone has that temperament. Bereavement is customary. And it signals to the rest the crew that this kind of loss is taken seriously.”

Kelly Chambers was not the sort of person found in the navy, at least not in space. She was empathetic and naïve and a little too interested in everyone around her— characteristics not much appreciated in the hothouse environment of a crowded ship. Shepard didn’t have anything against her, but had wondered more than once how she merited a place in this crew.

But nobody else had picked up on what was going on with Patel. Much less taken the initiative to do something about it. Even if Shepard had noticed, it never would have occurred to her to take her off the duty roster, because that just wasn’t how things were done in the Alliance. But this wasn’t a military ship.

“Nice catch,” Shepard said, meaning every word. She signed the roster and moved on to a logistics summary.

Kelly stood a little straighter. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Rest of the crew is holding up?” she asked, as she skimmed the report. It wouldn’t have occurred to her before. She’d been perhaps a little too quick to write off Kelly’s training as a psychologist.

“Mostly. We’re all shocked, of course. But the initial debate is dying down. I don’t think it’s likely to lead to a schism in the crew.” Kelly seemed surprised to be asked, and relieved.
Shepard recalled telling EDI everyone had to be allowed to do their job, and winced a bit. Before this mission she never would have guessed the navy was that insular, or that her own perspective was that warped by eleven years in the service.

Guilt that evaporated like a dandelion in a flamethrower when Kelly spoke again. “And... how are you holding up?”

She signed off on the logistics, and flipped to the next item, without so much as glancing up. Joker shifted uneasily beside her. Like he was trying to edge away from a bomb.

Kelly had to sense her mood. She was way too perceptive to not. But then, part of being a psychologist was prompting uncomfortable conversations people didn’t want to have. So she soldiered on. “It sounded incredibly rough down there, especially when you’re also worried about someone you care for.”

Shepard made a noise in her throat, somewhere between a dismissive grunt and an actual growl. The stylus squeaked over the glass as she signed the final report. Joker started to say something, and then stopped himself.

“I heard Commander Alenko took down the jamming tower.” Kelly had either no sense of self-preservation, or this was her equivalent of combat conditions. “He must be very brave, to do that without any protection from the swarms.”

And for some insane, illogical, moronic reason, that was the one that got to her. He set off a thermonuclear blast he was certain would kill him. Suborned a mutiny when they ran off to Ilos. Chased her down through the flames when the first Normandy was attacked.

He fell in love with his commanding officer and never gave a damn that it could end both their careers. No small thing when it was as much a calling as an occupation.

She made a show of tucking away the stylus in its slot on the datapad, buying her time until she could speak. “Yes. He is.”

Kelly took back the datapad, and finally had the good sense to let it go. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll get these approvals distributed.”

She left the bridge. An awkward silence descended. Joker coughed. “Sorry. About before. Guess you’re not at the bashing-the-ex stage—”

“I should have gone with him.” That was her moment, her one opportunity to save the relationship. And she threw it in the dirt. Because she didn’t have an ounce of humility, and would destroy herself if it meant saving her pride.

It spoke to Joker’s surprise that he dropped the sarcasm. “That didn’t work out last time.”

She shook her head, stubborn, frustrated. “He wanted me to report in. I could’ve done that. It wouldn’t have taken much time from the mission.”

His eyebrows rose. “You think they’d just let you waltz out afterwards?”

“I’d like to see them try to stop me.” But she sat back, raked her fingers through her hair. Blew out a breath. “He just came at me with all this moral superiority and I dug my heels. It’s like we weren’t even hearing each other anymore.”

“Yeah.” He gave her his very best are-you-stupid look. “Because you had a fight.”
Shepard rolled her eyes.

“Great comeback.” Then Joker straightened, abruptly all business. “Picking up something here.”

She scrutinized the blip on his ladar screen. “Ship just came through the relay?”

“Small. Maybe a half dozen crew?” He typed a query. “Lot of chatter.”

“Cerberus protocols?”

He shot her a startled look. “How did you—”

Another blip came on the screen. She pointed. “Identify that.”

A few more taps, and a short pause. “It’s a private shuttle. Didn’t come through the relay, so it must be from Horizon. It’s hailing the other ship.”

Her heart sank. She couldn’t claim to be surprised, but she was really hoping this exercise was a waste of time. “Can we overhear anything?”

“Negative. All comms are encrypted. I’m just getting overheads here.”

Shepard watched the two tiny blips coalesce into one signal. “They’re docking.”

“Yeah.” He glanced at her sidelong. “Want to tell me what this means?”

“It means our saboteur works for Cerberus.” She let out a long sigh, and stood, her hip muttering complaints.

“No.” He glanced from the ladar, to Shepard, and back. “There’s got to be some other explanation.”

“We know there was someone else on the ground. That jamming tower was up before the Collector ship landed, or Horizon would have sent out a distress call.” She shrugged. “What other reason is there for Cerberus to not tell us about other operations in the colony?”

“Secrecy. You know they don’t like cells talking to each other.”

“In an emergency like this, it’s all hands on deck.”

Joker was still shaking his head. “No, no— they used Kaidan as bait. And then they helped the Collectors abduct the colony?”

“You really think the Illusive Man doesn’t know how to play both ends of the stick?”

He went silent. Unhappy, but not contesting the point. She went on, “The Collectors probably didn’t know the agent was Cerberus. Or where the rumors originated.”

Joker looked up at her. “Now what?”

“Now we thread the needle.” They couldn’t trust Cerberus, not after this. Their mission still stood. She had to find a way to complete it, without relying on their sponsor, and without making an open enemy of him before she was ready.

And of course, EDI was always listening. “I’ve been thinking about this. Here’s where we’re going next.”
Joker grimaced, once, as she explained. But he didn’t argue.

The Normandy spent the remainder of the day in preparations, and exited the system through the relay the following morning. Shepard hauled her badly-neglected hardsuit down to the lounge along with a scrub brush and a large tube of omni-gel. Life went on.

The suit hadn’t been more superficially cleaned even once. It was in a sad state. This would take hours.

After a long, sobering look at her gear, she added a fifth of bourbon to her arsenal. For some unholy reason, it was the only good liquor aboard ship, and nobody had bothered to fix that situation yet. Then she laid down a drop cloth purloined from the shuttle maintenance pack, and got to work scraping off the worst of the Horizon mud.

She’d barely begun when Grunt wandered in. “Shepard.”

“Grunt.” She leaned into her work, the scrubber brush rasping over her armor. It was good to be underway again, even if she still had too much time to think. Kaidan had been right about nearly everything. Part of her wanted to throw it in Jack Harper’s face by calling Kaidan up from her Cerberus ship, to tell him so. The saner part knew gloating wasn’t worth the danger.

Grunt was pacing. Shepard’s experience with krogan was more-or-less limited to Wrex, who always wore a jaded, stony calm. “You okay?”

He twitched, and let out a snort of agitation. “Ship’s small. Crowded. Warlord Burda would herd you back, close in for the kill. Humans have fragile necks. Easy for krogan hands to snap.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Warlord Burda could try.”

“Heh heh.” Grunt scratched his forehead, at the edge of his plates, where the bone was fragmented. She supposed it might close up with age. “The tank showed me all kinds of things. How to kill humans, salarians, turians, mostly. A lot of turians. Made me remember. Couldn’t make me care.”

“Okeer was a millennia-old bag of bile.” Shepard reached for the bottle and tipped it back. Swallowed. “You get to think what you want.”

“I want to understand.” There was something frustrated, almost pained, about him. He resumed pacing. “Okeer wanted my hate. My strength. But it’s not mine, it just… is. At least his enemies earned what they were, weak or not.”

Shepard rubbed her forehead. “If you’re expecting me to summarize two thousand years of manipulation, war, and betrayal to teach you why Okeer was like that, you picked the wrong person.”

“It’s not a thing a human can understand. I don’t understand much, but I know that.”

The seat beside her was empty. She patted the cushion. “Sit.”

His look said he was close to flipping the couch over on her head, for being so clueless. Shepard sighed. “Grunt, you are way too deep in your head on this, and we don’t have a heavy enough bag aboard to let you punch it out. Sit.”
He rolled his eyes, and collapsed heavily onto the couch. Shepard bounced three centimeters into the air as her end went up. Grunt crossed his arms, all pout. “Now what?”

Moody adolescence could come in many forms. She clicked on the terminal and selected a vid serial. “Okeer gave you dry history. Let’s try a little fiction, see what stirs up.”

He made a noise between a snort and a growl, but his eyes strayed to the screen, interested despite himself. Shepard resumed her scouring as the first scene began to play.

After a few minutes, Grunt said, in a tone of confused awe, “That’s a krogan city.”

“It’s an alt-history, set before the uplift and nuclear wars.” Shepard had watched this particular series several times herself, as a teenager, when alien media still felt exotic. “The basic premise is what if turians made first contact.”

He leaned forward. Shepard settled back, and took another drink before picking up her gauntlet.

About three fingers into the bottle, the hatch zipped open. Garrus. She set down the brush and picked up the bourbon. “Hey.”

He watched her wipe her mouth. “I suppose I should be happy none of the fire alarms have gone off.”

She chuckled, wryly. “There’s some dextro stuff under the bar if you want to join me.”

He grimaced. “I’ve tried it. No thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” Shepard shrugged, and drank a second time before setting down the bottle and resuming her work. She felt grimy all over from the dirt and dust. The joints would be inoperable until she got them gunked out.

He glanced at the vid screen. His eyes bugged out. “You’re letting him watch Conquest of the Wilds? Do you want to start another krogan rebellion, right here on this ship?”

“I don’t let him do anything.” She paused. “It’s a little, uh, controversial—”

“You think?” Garrus didn’t seem to know whether to be amused or appalled. “There were riots. On Tuchanka and Palaven.”

Grunt chose that moment to let out a hearty laugh. On the screen, a patrol of turians were slaughtered in an ambush. Shepard glanced back at Garrus and shrugged. “If it pissed off them both in equal measure, there’s got to be something to it.”

He perched on an ottoman across from her, and changed the subject. “It’s probably a good thing the dextro liquor’s so awful. Alcohol makes it hard to sleep. Had enough problems with that lately.”

Shepard still hadn’t really gotten any rest. Enough that she wasn’t a zombie, but in fits and starts only. “I haven’t slept well since I was a toddler. Some times are worse than others. It sucks.”

“I almost didn’t interrupt. You seemed to be thinking hard.”

Hard was an overstatement. Just the same thoughts chasing themselves in circles. The argument, wondering if there was any point to contacting Kaidan even after they arrived in safe harbor, that three hundred thousand people were missing on her watch and the people cutting her checks were
responsible. “Just wondering how miserable someone has to get before the sweet release of catatonia.”

She said it flippantly, and meant it that way, but he didn’t laugh. “That doesn’t sound too healthy.”

“I suppose not.” She shrugged. “I don’t think I have it in me, anyhow. Years back I broke my leg. Compound fracture of the femur. Absolutely the worst pain of my life, and one of only a handful of times where I truly expected to die. I had to splint it myself. Things went gray at the edges more than a few times, but it never quite managed to completely knock me out. Guess psychological pain is the same way.”

If Garrus were human, he would have bitten his lip. As it was, the heavy upper flap of his mouth crumpled briefly. “Kaidan’ll get over it, you know. He was probably just…”

She looked up, with a rueful half-smile. “Being Kaidan.”

“Maybe.” Garrus struggled after the words. “When you died, it broke him. He disappeared into a hole and none of us were sure he’d be able to drag himself out. I don’t know what deals he had to make to survive, but he’s not the same person anymore.”

She deadpanned at him over the brush. “You think I don’t know anything about crawling out of holes.”

“I’m…” His eyes shifted, like he was searching for words. “You guys were the real thing. When Kaidan announced he was leaving the Normandy, there were bets going around about how long it would take for the wedding invitations to arrive. You don’t know the things he’s done for you.”

Shepard tendered him an exhausted look. “Don’t.”

“I’m trying to explain what happened while you were—”

“I don’t need you to explain anything. This is between me and him.”

His unbandaged mandible sucked close to his cheek. Garrus tried another tack. “I thought he’d be happy to see you.”

“He was.” She went back to scrubbing. Collectors didn’t bleed, but she’d swear there was still vorcha offal stuck in the crevices. She switched to a narrow scraping pick.

Garrus was all disbelief. “He didn’t act like it.”

Shepard concentrated on her work. “You quit C-Sec twice.”

He scowled. “That has nothing to do with anything.”

Guess that hit a nerve. Well, everyone, up to and including Garrus, had been plucking her nerves like guitar strings for days. Turnabout was more than fair. “You have a sense of moral obligation, but it’s not quite the same as a sense of duty. Doing things the right way never enters into your equation. That’s how you ended up in a gang war on Omega.”

He opened his mouth, clearly resentful, but Shepard forestalled him with a look. “But to Kaidan, it can’t be the right thing if it’s not done the right way. It matters to him.”

Garrus sat back and crossed his arms, twitching. “You don’t have to be so damn annoyed.”

“I only wish everyone would stop suggesting it would be so nice if Kaidan wasn’t Kaidan.” She
sighed. “He’s an Alliance officer, Garrus. That comes first. He did what he was supposed to do.”

“Alliance officers are supposed to behave like complete jackasses while executing their duty?”

Shepard set down her gear and took another hit of bourbon. “No, that was just for me.”

Then he did laugh, and she chuckled too, because it was awful and absurd and just life. Garrus said, “I meant it, though. Kaidan’ll come to his senses. I bet he already regrets it and is too embarrassed to fess up.”

“No one can claim we’re not tenacious.”

“I think you meant ‘stubborn as hell’,” he corrected.

Before she could reply, Grunt threw them a caustic look. “Can you both shut your mouths? I’m trying to hear this.”

Garrus cleared his throat and continued at a softer volume. “Good to be underway again, but I don’t understand our destination. Illium? Really?”

Shepard picked up her shoulder armor and started scraping out the old, clumpy omni-gel. “Cerberus set up Horizon. They’re playing more than one side here, and I won’t accept being sent into a situation without all the information. Not when it can endanger my team.”

“I’m all for putting some distance between us and Cerberus, but that still doesn’t tie it together. Illium’s like Omega for people with more money and weaker stomachs. Even if it weren’t an asari colony, the Collectors don’t have the muscle to hit it.”

“I’m not looking for Collectors.” She set down to the piece, and reached again for the bottle. “I’m looking for the Shadow Broker.”

Garrus stared. The scraper broke on a particularly sticky bit. Shepard let out an exasperated curse, and drank again. The liquor swished in the bottle.

Grunt eyed it in her hand. “Give me some of that.”

Shepard and Garrus exchanged a look. Garrus said, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Fuck off,” said Grunt, and reached for the bourbon.

Shepard shrugged. “Don’t say we never warned you.”

He took a large glug. Then doubled over, coughing and sputtering. Shepard started to laugh; she couldn’t help it. And that set Garrus chuckling.

So of course, that was when Miranda entered the lounge. She took in the three of them, the armor spread among its own detritus on the cloth, the half-empty fifth, and made a sound of contempt.

“What?” Shepard asked, grinning.

She stalked to the bar, grabbed a glass, and slammed it down on the table at Shepard’s elbow.

Shepard looked from the glass to Miranda. “Okay.”

“It’s eleven in the morning,” she said, with frost. “At least if you’re drinking from a glass, you’ve still got some dignity.”
Garrus shrugged. “She’s got a point.”

Shepard rolled her eyes, but reclaimed the bottle and set aside, as Grunt continued to cough. “How can I help you?”

Miranda sat and crossed her legs, primly. “Let’s talk about what happens when we get to Illium. I assume you’re looking for an information broker. I’d like to know why.”

The trust between her and Miranda was growing, but it was still a new and fragile thing. Shepard took a different tack than with Garrus. “Cerberus may have a lot of intel, but they’re biased, and they’re also not sharing everything. I want a new source of information about the Collectors. A fresh perspective.”

“Illium’s high-end. Do you have a contact there? Because taking shots in the dark about this will cost us, and possibly tip our hand.”

“Not exactly. I all but lived there for several years. I know how the place works, and I know how to spot what I’m looking for.”

Garrus blinked. “How does a naval officer end up on Illium?”

She shifted in her seat. “I had a long-term girlfriend. Not officially moving in was a subject of much debate.”

Tantrums, really. But it wasn’t like the intricacies of her relationship with Nehal were relevant.

But Garrus wasn’t done digging. “Strain got to be too much? That why you broke up?”

“She threw a vase at my head,” Shepard answered, annoyed, and badly wanting to get him off this topic. “Does it matter?”

“Not in the slightest,” Miranda said. “What are you looking for, exactly?”

“I want a line straight to the Shadow Broker.”

Comprehension dawned. “And anyone working directly for the Shadow Broker can name their price. Hence, Illium.”

“Hence Illium,” she agreed. “You told me that when you tracked down my body, the Shadow Broker was trying to acquire it for the Collectors. So he knows something about them. Maybe more than Cerberus, and certainly more than us.”

“It can’t hurt.” Then she reflected. “Except when it does. You may attract the wrong kind of attention.”

“We can handle his agents if it comes to that.” She would give the Horizon mission that much credit—it had dispelled any doubts she had about her team. “But if he wanted my corpse that badly, I think he’ll want to talk.”

“I think it’s wiser not to assume his motives. But I agree. We’re not courting enemies out of our league.” Miranda rose. “I’ll see what I can do about arranging for our arrival. And whether any of my contacts can give us a good lead.”

“Thanks.” As she left, Shepard looked at Garrus. “You need anything else?”

He studied her. “Your ex still live there?”
That really irritated her. “God knows I have no idea. I was twenty-six when we broke up. That was like centuries ago in spectre years.”

“Okay, okay.” He held up his hands in surrender.

But she couldn’t resist a barb of her own. “So where does your ex live?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever mentioned—”

“Sure, but there’s someone, right? At least one?” Shepard raised an eyebrow. “Is she still on Palaven? I’m guessing it’s a she. Or maybe someone in C-Sec, partner becomes a partner, eh?”

He was mortified. “A shipmate, when I did my second tour in the Hierarchy navy.”

“A shipmate. How delightful.” Shepard kept her voice as arch as possible. “Do tell. Did she leave you when you left for the Citadel, or did you try to make it work for a while, every vid call more stilted than the last, until one day you realized you hadn’t talked to her in a month and it was the most comfortable month since—”

“Alright.” His mandible twitched. “Message received. I’ll stop asking about Kaidan. Or anyone.”

“I’d appreciate it.” She picked up her armor. “We’ve got four relays to go, and we’re taking the long way, to keep picking up data for those ship upgrades. If you have any other thoughts on this plan, I’m all ears.”

At which point, Grunt punched the volume up to max with a glare. Garrus shook his head, and to Shepard’s surprise, picked up one of her boots and started scraping out the tread.

They ended the day with three relays left to go. Theoretically, a ship could come through a relay, swing around in an hour or less, and go through again to the next system. In reality, almost every system lucky enough to have an activated relay was inhabited, which meant traffic. Even in Council space fees to jump the queue could be exorbitant; in the lawless Terminus, without connections, it was occasionally impossible, and nearly always impractical. Shepard considered their progress good time.

For all that they were privately funded, the mission was in good financial shape. Miranda had obviously grown up with serious money, and was educated to inherit the business that generated it — skills she put to good use as the Normandy’s X.O. Shepard was pleasantly surprised to learn they had enough cash-on-hand to begin some of the upgrades she wanted the next time they were in port. The discount from the salarian miners on Omega went a long way.

Then she spoke with the engineers about some slight variations in power output, and Jacob about the state of their munitions. That took her up to evening mess, after which she retired to her cabin, and fell asleep reading more reports. The ship was enormous, and much of it was new technology. Not a day passed without at least a handful of small surprises.

Some hours later, Shepard woke with an unpleasant roiling in her abdomen, like a meat grinder was slowly churning through her guts. She stared groggily at the clock— barely two A.M. Right smack in the middle of peak deep sleep. Fantastic.

She rolled off the bed and lurched towards the head. It was a haunting kind of pain, something she’d felt before, but couldn’t place in her sluggish state. Probably the third helping of dinner.
Gardner’s food wasn’t that good.

The stainless toilet was every bit as cold as she feared the first time she laid eyes on it. But she wriggled out of her shorts and dropped onto the seat. Then stared, dumbfounded, at the red-soaked gusset of her underwear. Her first period in over ten years.

“She removed my implant,” Shepard said aloud, to no one in particular. “That bitch removed my implant and didn’t put it back.”

Her panties slithered to the floor entirely of their own volition.

Shepard buried in her face in her hands and started laughing, first in helpless chuckles born of the late hour and the total helplessness of the situation, growing into gales so loud tears leaked out between her fingers, because if this wasn’t the perfect summary of the last month of her life, she didn’t know what was. She ought to be grateful to be alive, and wasn’t as though she found the alternative attractive, but holy fuck was rebirth an incredible pain in the ass.

Nothing worked right. Nothing was where she left it. She spent half her time dodging unexpected complications in places that should be like home— her body, her mind, her friends, her work. Even this goddamn ship. None of that had the piety of gratitude. More like resentment.

She laughed because this was it. That final shortsighted indignity, proof that she had no control of this body, not even the parts that billions of other women managed with ease. Because a bunch of doctors thought she’d be able to slide back into living without missing a step, despite being so slipshod they failed to replace a ubiquitous bit of hardware available free at any clinic in the Systems Alliance. Because everything was so very wrong in so many sloppy, lazy ways that the only thing left to do was laugh.

After a little while she collected herself, just barely, her mouth still quivering, cleaned up, got changed, and found supplies in the pile of shit at the bottom of the bathroom closet. If she hadn’t been so worked up when she first came aboard, that would’ve been a clue something was very wrong.

As she headed back to bed, EDI brought up the lights in her cabin. “Shepard, there is a problem on Deck Three.”

She glanced up at the ceiling, instinctive, though in this room the speaker was imbedded in the bulkhead. The stars moved slowly across the massive skylight. “What is it?”

“Crewman Patel is refusing to perform her duties.”

Shepard tilted her head slightly, confusion momentarily overriding her general discomfort. Patel was the same crewman Kelly took off general duties. “She’s the AI specialist?”

“Yes.” If a voice could frown, EDI’s was doing so. “I had hoped she would approach you on her own. One of my memory units has unexpectedly failed and requires attention. I have been unable to coax Crewman Patel into replacing it.”

That alarmed her. “So we’ve been sitting here undefended?”

“Not at all. You appreciate biological analogies, so allow me to attempt one. It is a boo-boo.”

It said something about this week that hearing an AI say ‘boo-boo’ wasn’t close to the most surreal thing to have happened. Shepard glanced at the clock again. “EDI, it’s late.”
“You are awake,” she pointed out. “Crewman Patel is in the starboard observation lounge. She appears to be in some distress.”

She rubbed her gritty eyes. “Alright. I’m on my way down.”

Pulling on the first set of real clothes she found crumpled on her floor, Shepard headed for the elevator and descended to Deck Three. Starboard observation was less frequented than its port-side counterpart. Rather than a bar and entertainment pods, starboard had a stocked bookshelf, lounging couches, and an abundance of quiet. Even the air temperature seemed lower than elsewhere on the ship.

Sarah Patel sat curled up at the far end of one couch, as small as possible, a ball of a woman. Her head was buried in her knees.

Shepard barely made any sound as she came through the hatch bare-footed. Tentatively, she said, “Sarah?”

Patel started. She looked to be in her late twenties, slight and dark, with eyes that seemed a little large for her head. Her black hair was bound back in a single thick braid hanging to her waist. “It’s you.”

“EDI summoned me,” she explained, almost an apology. “Is something wrong?”

Her face turned back towards the port. It made up nearly the entire exterior bulkhead in this room, an extravagance of space. Her voice bleak. “I got a vid recording from my sister. Her husband and son are both missing.”

Something inside her deflated. Shepard sank onto the couch. “They were on Horizon.”

It wasn’t a question; Kelly had already told her that much. But she’d still hoped they would be found. The whole colony was in chaos, the missing and dead still being counted.

Patel shook her head, not a denial, but more a refusal to believe this situation. “Cerberus did that. And here I am. How do I explain that to her?”

Shepard leaned forward until her head was almost in her lap, and let out a long breath. Her hands ran over her hair. Nearly a minute passed as she tried to think of what to say. “I’m angry nearly all the time now.”

“Pardon, ma’am?”

Ma’am. Somehow nearly all of them had picked that up, even though this wasn’t an Alliance ship and she didn’t technically have a commission anymore.

But a command was a command, by whatever name. “I’ve always had a bad temper. But lately it’s constantly running high. The littlest thing sets me off.”

“A B A R .”

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After a moment, a little uncertain, Patel ventured, “You had two years of your life taken away. That would upset anyone.”

“But I got it back. Or so everyone keeps reminding me.” She sat back, slouching down and folding her arms across her stomach. “Nobody’s bringing back the people we lost on Horizon. Or anywhere else. Just me. And I have to live with that, too. Being so angry over something that is supposed to make me grateful, and the guilt.”
“Guilt?” Bewildered at that.

“Twenty-three people died on the SR-1. All of them had families, friends, people who missed them. I’m the only one who got brought back.” She licked her lips. “I wonder how I’d explain to them that I’m sitting here, doing this with Cerberus. And what they’d say to me.”

“My sister thinks it was an accident.” Her voice had gone very quiet, her knees hugged up tight to her chest. “Just bad luck that Horizon got hit.”

“She’s not wrong.” At Patel’s doubtful look, Shepard added, “How is living in a colony the Illusive Man targeted any different from living on one the Collectors chose independently?”

She gave her a look like she was the densest person in the universe. “I’m working for Cerberus.”

“Sure. But you didn’t do this. We didn’t do this.”

Patel got up and went to the window, pacing, aggravated. “Everyone’s heard the rumors, about the research divisions. I never believed them. It didn’t seem possible—we’re trying to save humanity. Save our homes.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Cerberus plays close to the chest. I don’t know the half of what they’ve done and doubt I ever will, but what I do know is plenty enough to keep me up at night.”

“So how didn’t you guess?” Patel whirled on her, going from troubled to furious in a blink. “If we’re such terrible people, how didn’t you know this would happen? You’re a spectre. Isn’t it your job to clean things like us up?”

“This is what being a spectre is.” Not angry. But definitely out of patience, each word dropped hard and even, like stones. “It’s accepting that what I want isn’t important. It’s doing things I don’t want to do, with allies I don’t always like, because the only thing that does matter is my mandate to protect the people who live in this latrine of galaxy. How am I supposed to tell someone like your sister, or your nephew, that I gave up a ship I need to defeat the Collectors because I’d rather douse the Illusive Man in lit kerosene than work with him?”

Patel blinked. “But—”

“No buts. It’s hard, and it’s awful, but it’s our job and it has to be done, so we’re going to go on doing it.” Realizing, belatedly, that was word-for-word what Anderson told her. But Patel wasn’t a marine, so she softened her tone. “And if we’re going to get this done, I need very badly for every person on this mission to continue doing her job.”

She started shaking her head—shaking everything, really, her eyes heavy and wet. “I can’t—I’ve been helping Cerberus. I can’t stay.”

“You haven’t been helping them. You didn’t do a damn thing that led the Collectors to Horizon,” Shepard said, again. Emphatically. “You stopped it from being worse. EDI aimed those guns, and you keep EDI running.”

Patel swallowed a small noise that may have been the beginnings of a sob, and collapsed on the couch, her face hidden in her hands.

Shepard scooted a bit closer, and rested her hand on Patel’s shoulder, tentative. “Sometimes I do want to leave. I want to see my family, I want to see Kaidan, I want to put my life back together and never lay eyes on Cerberus again. Sometimes I want it so much I forget why I shouldn’t.”
That was true enough, if not the complete truth. When she left on Korlus, she’d been so out of her mind that she forgot everything else that was important.

Patel didn’t move away, but didn’t raise her head. Her voice muffled in her palms. “So why don’t you?”

“Because…” Shepard trailed off. “Because I think about Ken and Gabby and Joker and how they’re here in part because of me, because they couldn’t stand what the Council did to my memory. And I think about Kelly, who’s so naïve it strains belief but she just wants so badly to help. And all the people on this ship who know the disillusionment and the rage that comes from suffering the worst this galaxy can dish out, and they’re still here. Still trying. How do I tell them I’m done?”

Patel didn’t reply. But she’d gone still, as if she was listening very intently.

Shepard took a breath. “And because I know tomorrow, Cerberus won’t be any better, but I will be. It won’t be less awful, but it will be easier. Every day.”

Patel shook her head. “I’d like to believe that.”

“You should talk to Kelly.” Shepard stood. “Because this part’s her job. To keep you running.”

She said it like a joke, and it got her a tiny, fleeting smile. Shepard jerked her head towards the hatch. “Now, I’m sure your rack’s missing you.”

Patel likewise stood, wiping at her face. “Yes, ma’am. If it’s all the same, first I have a memory unit to replace.”
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An archway stood before her. Masonry, not more than ten years old, etched with acid and scoured by sand to make it look ancient, some real Middle Earth shit. The entrance to Abael’s museum district. They’d doubled over laughing the first time they laid eyes on it.

Nothing seemed funny now. Kaidan glanced back, a few paces ahead of her. His brow furrowed like it got when he was worried. He said something she couldn’t catch, and started to walk.

Shepard chased after him, gripped by an increasing sense of urgency, though she was damned if she knew why. She was losing him in the crowd, the air full of rustling whispers, a papery sound, not much like human voices. Every person turned briefly to peer at her a she knocked and stumbled her way through.

At last, she caught sight of his flag of black hair, going curly in the salt breeze, as he slipped down a side street. It sloped into a small plaza. A lone leafless tree stabbed upwards, stark like a warning, a skin-crawling shape her eyes refused to linger on. Instead, she jumped down the face of a crumbling brick wall, hurrying to catch up, as Kaidan continued to gain ground.

Her mouth grimaced, irritated. He jogged along as if trying to escape her. It was tremendously thoughtless. Rude, even. She stalked past a fritzing tourist information terminal, and into a square framed by faceless brown-walled buildings looming up towards a distant hidden sun. The weak light caught on their drab slatted glass. Here and there, broad retaining walls played host to half-dead plants.

This was not the Abael seen in brochures. This was something else, something hidden. Something dangerous, to judge by Kaidan’s stride.

“Hey!” she yelled again, louder this time.

Kaidan paused and looked over his shoulder. “Hurry.”

“What the hell—” But he was already off again, speeding along to make up for those precious seconds of lost time. He eased through the crowd of tourists like an eel, or a phantom.

She squeezed past with a stream of muttered curses and half-fell down an unexpected break in the road, landing hard. Something crunched in her knee. Shepard swore.

Face full of gravel, she raised her head and looked upon the strangest park she’d ever seen. Great jagged boulders of large-grained rock jutted up from the ground. A forest of half-dead trees with branches like forked lightening darkened the far end where they disappeared into the middle distance. Shadows moved in their depths, shambling, flitting figures with glowing eyes. Shepard didn’t scare easy, but Kaidan or no Kaidan, there was no way in the ever-loving fuck she was going in there.

No sign of him anywhere. Her chest tightened. She had to find him, had to catch up, something very bad was coming and they had to be together before—
“It is now 0430,” EDI said, as the lights in her cabin flared to blinding strength.

Shepard blinked up at the plasma wash over her skylight, the last of the dream still loud in her mind. “What—”

In the same smooth and placid tone, EDI continued, “There are several new notices awaiting you at your terminal.”

She rubbed her eyes, if anything feeling more exhausted than before she laid down. It was bad enough she thought about him every five minutes with her eyes open. Did he really have to invade her sleep, too?

“Where are we?” she asked, putting her feet on the floor and forcing herself out of bed. Resolving to forget the bizarre and awful dream. Abael was one of the few truly unblemished memories they had together from before; Shepard refused to allow recent events to taint it.

“Dholen, the Far Rim. We have nearly completed a low-resolution global scan of the planet Gotha.”

“Good.” If the Illusive Man took her expedition to Illium poorly, they might be more reliant than ever on other resources. She was willing to bet their salarian contact could provide more than ship tech if pressed.

“Yeoman Chambers sent up a breakfast tray. It is waiting outside your hatch.”

“She doesn’t have to do that,” she said, automatically. The trays made their first appearance the morning after Horizon. As if Kelly thought she required special consideration just now. It grated.

But she went and collected the tray anyway, because there was no point in it going to waste, or so she told herself. Today was a couple of pieces of toast with strawberry jam, and a giant cup of coffee with enough sugar to hold a spoon upright. Shepard took it to her desk, and took a sip as she opened her terminal and glanced at her email.

The air went out of her. She set the mug down, and stared at the header.

From: ktalenko@systemsalliance.mil

Subject: About Horizon…

He found her recording, he must have, to know this address. It took a few minutes for her to collect herself. Then she shut her eyes, just for a second, her whole body begging please in one wordless gesture, reached forward and tapped it open.

Nathaly,

I’m sorry for what I said back on Horizon.

A little tension eased, enough to free her diaphragm. She took a breath.

I spent two years pulling myself back together after you went down with the Normandy. It took me a long time to get over my guilt for surviving and move on. I’d finally let my friends talk me into going out for drinks with a doctor on the Citadel. Nothing serious, but trying to let myself have a life again, you know?

That was a non-sequitur. She knew he’d take her death hard, probably blame himself. And the last
thing she ever wanted was for him to be unhappy and alone for the rest of his life. But feeling honor-bound to tell her about it— that was Kaidan tripping over his own feet.

She shook her head and read on.

*Then I saw you, and everything pulled hard to port. You were standing in front of me, but you were with Cerberus. I guess I really don’t know who either of us is anymore.*

And that was a genuine apology, for saying the one thing he knew would hurt her the most, after two years out of the world, after all the compromises she’d had to make since waking up. For the first time in days, she felt the faintest spark of hope.

*Do you even remember that night before Ilos?*

For a second, Shepard forgot herself enough to laugh. He must really be in a state if he had to ask. That was Kaidan, getting twisted up inside his own head. She’d loved that about him. How deeply he thought about things, how much he cared, how hard he tried to be fair to every point of view. But she’d forget her own name before she forgot that night.

*That night meant everything to me... maybe it meant as much to you. But a lot has changed in the last two years and I can’t just put that aside. You haven’t seen the things Cerberus has done while you’ve been gone.*

*But please be careful. I’ve watched too many people close to me die— on Eden Prime, on Virmire, on Horizon, on the Normandy. I couldn’t bear it if I lost you again. If you’re still the woman I remember, I know you’ll find a way to stop these Collector attacks. But Cerberus is too dangerous to be trusted. Watch yourself, too. There is a reason they brought you back and I don’t know what it is.*

*When things settle down a little... maybe... I don’t know. Just take care.*

—Kaidan

Shepard picked up her coffee. Took a sip. Took another breath. Read it again, and then a third time. Leaned forward until her face was buried in her hands.

Her heart felt so sore, so ragged. Hating this with every cell. Wishing she’d said fuck it and gone with him, given them days aboard shuttles and in spaceports to talk this out, face to face, instead of these stilted, sterile ways of trying to say something honest while feeling each other out.

Wishing like hell it could be as simple as writing back, *I’m still here, I still love you, I’m so sorry for what I put you through.*

She could have spent one stupid night in the apartment they were supposed to share. Had one stupid breakfast together at their own table. How pathetic was it that her fantasies had been reduced to a cold bowl of cornflakes?

Not that anyone would ever buy that actually was her fantasy. At this point, Shepard was fairly confident she never wanted anyone to see her naked ever again. With the way cybernetics glowed, she couldn’t even turn off the lights and pretend. Hell, she could barely look at herself in the shower without going back to that lab, to what Cerberus did to her, and she honestly expected him to believe she was the same? That she hadn’t been transmuted while lying on that table, people’s hands pawing her skin and tubes threading through her veins and the whirring of machinery—

A shudder ran through her. She rubbed her arms, curling her knees up to her chest. Closed her
eyes and locked it down. Took a few more deep breaths.

Every human in this part of the galaxy was depending on her ability to keep her head on straight. That was all that mattered. And for the first time since Horizon, Shepard felt a flash of real anger — because Kaidan of all people should goddamn understand that, and should be helping her, not adding to her problems.

Even as the thought formed she knew it wasn’t fair. Shepard was not inclined to care about fair or not. Where was the fairness in being kept in a state of pseudo-life for two years? In watching every part of her life that mattered slip out of her hands?

Her commission was gone, she threw away her spectre title, her friends didn’t recognize her, her boyfriend didn’t trust her, and she was living on a ship full of people she would have shot under other circumstances. Maybe none of that mattered, either. She had a job to do. She was still determined to defeat the Collectors. She was just damned if she had any idea how.

EDI broke her reverie. “Shepard, you have an incoming transmission from Arcturus Station.”

Shepard took another big sip of coffee. Massaged her forehead. Because of course Kaidan reported her to the brass, and she should have been expecting this since the moment they saw each other. It still came out of nowhere.

She wiped her mouth and straightened her shirt, wishing briefly she had time to shower and change. Not remotely ready for this conversation, but what else was new, lately. “If you must.”

The glass case over her desk opaqued. It was built for model ships. Never once in her life had Shepard assembled such a thing, and she had no idea why anyone would build it into a cabin meant for her. Clearly this Normandy had been through a few mission changes while she was dead.

There was a bit of static, and then the image resolved. Shepard’s mouth dropped open.

“You might be interested to know that Lieutenant Clare is safely home.” He folded his arms, waiting for a reaction.

“I’m glad,” she said, honestly, not caring what in the hell Cerberus made of it. Not once had she disguised her allegiances. “He never should have been put in that position. It was bad staff work.”

“I hoped you might do us another favor,” he went on, sidestepping the matter altogether. From Hackett, in this mood, that was as good as an admission. “As you know, the navy can’t interfere in matters of the Terminus without tempting the wrath of the Council. I understand you are currently undertaking a mission within Terminus space.”

That was delicately put. “That’s correct. I’m trying to end these Collector attacks on human colonies.”

“That’s quite a mouthful.”

She sat back. “I notice you didn’t challenge any part of that statement.”
“Commander Alenko confirmed the Collectors are our mystery aggressors, and your role in driving them off Horizon.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “I assume he also had a few things to say about who’s funding my mission. He sure as hell said some things to me.”

“That’s a discussion for another time.” But he hesitated then, as if raising this was something he’d already debated with himself. “He was adamant that the Shepard he remembered would not voluntarily work for Cerberus. It’s not mission-relevant, but I admit to some curiosity about the validity of his conviction.”

She looked away. “He said that.”

“I’ll give you this, Commander. You do have a way with people. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so angry defend the person who caused that anger with such excessive vigor.”

She couldn’t help it. She started to laugh. More despairing than funny, but laughter all the same. “That’s just Kaidan. He’d never let a personal grudge stand in the way of the truth.”

Hackett was less amused. “And what is that truth? The one he told me?”

“Cerberus brought me back to life. I wish they hadn’t.” Simply, flatly. “Everything else I’m still trying to figure out.”

He rubbed his chin. “How close were you and Alenko?”

That came out of left field. “Close enough that I know better than to answer.”

As per usual, as if this conversation weren’t happening two years post-mortem, he remaining unmoved by her sarcasm. “Only you seemed surprised when I informed you of his transfer orders in ’83. It seemed odd, that a commander so esteemed by her crew wouldn’t know one of her officers planned to leave. And Alenko didn’t provide a reason for the request.”

She regarded him evenly. He could suspect all he wanted; she wasn’t about to throw Kaidan into that pot of hot water. Or have it added to whatever list Hackett was compiling on her. “What did you want, Admiral?”

Either her answer sufficed or Hackett was willing to let it lie. “There’s a colony on Watson. You would have missed the drama when it was founded. Three separate nations back on Earth, none of them small, each staking a claim. So it’s always been a bit precarious.”

“I have been surprised there are this many human colonies out here to abduct. Things change.”

“A lot of our Traverse colonists, not to mention their home countries, lost faith in the navy after the war with the geth. Figured they were better off on their own.”

“And god knows UNAS and the People’s Federation and the rest of them have been dying for a second bite at the apple, once we made first contact and they realized space was the only future that mattered.”

He cracked a small smile. “Spoken like a true spacer.”

Shepard shrugged. “We are what we are. What’s wrong with Watson?”

“In this vein, they set up a few missile silos and a basic defense station on their moon. We’ve
monitored it as a matter of course.”

“A matter of course?”

“The munitions are Alliance. We let them find their way to the colony, but obviously, we’d prefer they didn’t sell them off.” Hackett glanced down at a datapad. “The base went offline last week. We’ve been unable to get close enough to ascertain the problem, and the colony hasn’t reacted.”

“Smells fishy.” Shepard leaned forward on the desk. “But it doesn’t smell like Collectors. This isn’t how they soften the ground.”

“I agree. This is a separate matter.” He studied her, with a piercing blue-eyed gaze that hadn’t changed an iota in two years. It could still see straight through her bullshit. “The navy would take it as a personal favor if you could spare a moment to look into the situation.”

Shepard had already made up her mind, but she couldn’t resist needling. “And that’s it? No orders to report in, no chastisement, no demands for proof about my resurrection?”

“We let you go to the spectres. If you want to come home, that’s your business. I’m in only interested in whether you still care about doing your job.”

That hint of reproach, the familiar dry disappointment of a superior officer, was like a shot of steel to her spine. She sat up straight. “I’m headed that direction now. We’ll make a detour.”

“Glad to hear it. Let me know what you find.” He reached for the button to end the comm call. “Hackett out.”

His image disappeared, revealing the empty model case once more. Shepard slouched back in the chair, took a bite of toast, and flung the rest of it back onto the plate. “Shit.”

Not just because she now had to explain this to her Cerberus crew. Because it would’ve been simpler if he ordered her back. Not that she would’ve gone, not immediately, but at least she’d know where she stood. At least she’d know someone wanted her back, even if it was only to chew her ass.

Possibly Hackett didn’t know either— or was still making up his mind. His word would carry a lot of weight.

Shepard ran her fingers backwards through her hair, still rumpled from sleep. Kaidan’s nasty slight — the Nathaly I knew would’ve killed every last member of Cerberus for cutting off her hair.

Her mouth settled in a line. She had no control of Kaidan, or Cerberus, or how her new life would interact with her old duties. But for damn sure this was the last time she would have to look at the Cerberus Lab Special inflicted on her head.

Rising, she found a pair of small scissors in the detritus of her bathroom cabinet. Humming tunelessly along with the awful music someone pre-installed in this cabin, making a mental note to find an hour to reprogram it, she trimmed up the top and clipped the sides as close as she could. Not stopping until they were reduced to a fine fuzz. Not quite as tidy as a buzz cut, but good enough. It took some time.

Shepard stood straight and inspected her handiwork. Raking her fingers through the longer strands on top until they stood up slightly. Pleased with the slightly wild effect.

Then she swallowed the last of her breakfast, and went downstairs to program their new
Shepard and Zaeed stood on the bridge, looking down at the blue-green arc of the planet Watson. They were still thirty minutes out, the stealth system fully engaged.

It was, as far as Shepard could tell, a perfect garden world, if a touch cold beyond the equatorial regions. Lush atolls dotted its waters between the shining hemispheres of its large ice caps.

“Nice little planet,” Zaeed grunted, folding his arms. “Ripe for the taking.”

“Thereir comm traffic seems normal.” Shepard leaned over Joker’s couch, taking in the display. “Anything on ladar?”

Joker pointed at a blip. “Some ship’s parked in orbit around the moon. It’s one of those weird hybrid classes we’ve seen all over the Terminus.”

“But not Collector.” Shepard hadn’t expected it would be, but any kind of break was welcome.

“No,” Joker confirmed. “But check this out. All their comms are encrypted, but they’re using the same protocols as the geth in ‘83.”

“It’s a geth ship?” She couldn’t have been more surprised. “Did we go back in time two years? And if so, can we swing by Arcturus real quick so I can update my will?”

“Nice.” Joker rolled his eyes. “I will remind you that we were, in fact, scouting for geth in the Terminus when we lost the original Normandy. And we found more than a few encampments.”

Shepard glanced back at Zaeed. “Geth out here a usual thing, or…”?

He likewise scrutinized the ladar scan, frowning. “Usual M.O. would to scavenge the missiles from the defense silos. Alliance tech is worth a lot on the open market. I doubt the geth are interested.”

“Why the moon bases?” Franklin falling silent could signal the start of an invasion, but the colony wasn’t so large that geth would need to bother with subtlety.

Joker looked up at her for the first time since she came on the bridge, and blinked. “Jack send you to her barber?”

“It was time for a change.” Unfazed.

“Okay.” He still seemed unsettled, giving her small peeks from time to time. “Not exactly regulation.”

“Like either of us gives a damn.”

Joker cleared his throat and got back to business. “It’s not a big ship. We could take it out from here. Leave ‘em stranded and mop up.”

“They’re right over the base.”

“You’re worried I’ll miss?” He’d never sounded so offended.

“We still don’t know much about geth technology, and there’s enough munitions underneath them
to blow a new crater in that moon.” She folded her arms, straightening with a sigh. “Not to mention a full garrison.”

“It’ll come to a fight either way,” said Zaeed, glancing at her. “All they need is to glance out a window.”

IES did not protect the ship from being spotted by a pair of eyes— just instruments operating at other wavelengths. “Can we come in behind the moon, stay out of their visual range as long as possible?”

Joker shrugged. “We’ll be pushing the heat sinks to their limit. It’s a damn big moon to circle around.”

“Do it,” she said. “We’ll come out of stealth out of visual range and take the shuttle into the base.”

Zaeed had a kind of dry disdain that never failed to irritate her. “That geth ship will blow our shuttle out of the sky.”

“Which is why the Normandy will lure it away once the shuttle is launched,” she continued, with a patience she didn’t feel. “We’ll get your fight. Joker, I need you to hustle them. If they realize how outclassed they are, they may launch those missiles— at us or the colony, or both.”

“Sure,” Joker said. “As long as I get to waste them at the end of this.”

“Naturally,” she said.

EDI manifested on the console. “Shepard, I have been listening to the colony’s communications. I believe I can mimic their vital characteristics to provide the illusion that we were dispatched by the colony itself. It is unlikely that the geth will view such a ship as a significant threat.”

“Good,” she said. “It’s clear the colony is too nervous to call for help, so that’s exactly what most adversaries would expect.”

Zaeed rubbed his chin. “I’m still not sure about having an AI aboard, but it’s damn useful.”

Shepard privately agreed, but expressing that in front of EDI was getting more uncomfortable every day.

Jacob appeared at the hatch and spared her any reply. “Commander, can I have a minute?”

“Yeah.” She turned back to Joker. “Let me know when we’re fifteen minutes out.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

She stepped out with Jacob. “What’s on your mind?”

“Heard you were keeping this one small. Curious who you’ve got in mind.”

Shepard wasn’t keen on taking a large complement through the low and narrow passages of a typical lunar base. “Kasumi for recon, since we know jack shit about this installation. Zaeed for firepower.”

This mission needed to be quick and clean. That wasn’t the place for her more boisterous team members. Miranda she needed here in command of the Normandy while they lured out the geth ship, and Garrus still needed more rest than he let on.
Jacob straightened and slid his hands behind his back. “I’d like to volunteer.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “Any particular reason?”

“The Illusive Man pulled a dirty trick on Horizon. I’d like a chance to balance the score for Cerberus.”

“You know who pointed us this direction, right?”

“All the same.” He stood military-still, looking directly ahead.

Words rose on her tongue. *Cerberus doesn’t have any honor to restore.*

But as the incident with Crewman Patel demonstrated, Shepard couldn’t say that. Had probably already said it too often. Not couldn’t— shouldn’t. Nobody on this ship was responsible for the horrible things Cerberus had done, with the possible exception of Miranda, and even that seemed a poor bet. For that matter, nobody on this ship had said one word in protest over doing this on the navy’s behalf, whereas Shepard tied herself in knots questioning the ethics of executing this mission with Cerberus support. Probably there was a lesson in that somewhere.

“Get your gear,” she said. It was the kindest thing she could bring herself to say. Then she went to collect the rest of her team.

Fifty minutes later, Oyama set them down on the lifeless surface of Watson’s moon. Though large relative to Watson’s size, it was still a small body, with a gravity equally slight. They secured their breather helmets. Shepard gave Oyama a nod. “This shouldn’t take long.”

She shifted in her seat, with none of her usual cockiness. “Sure you want me to just sit here with my ass out?”

*Normandy* lured the geth ship away, and we’re going to keep them busy inside.” Not that personal arms could do much to a shuttle.

“If I went back to orbit, I could be ready to assist you or the *Normandy* at a moment’s notice.”

The idea that the *Normandy* might need help from a shuttle was ludicrous. Shepard furrowed her brow. “We don’t have time to debate this. Sit tight, radio if anything happens, and we’ll talk about it later.”

Oyama swallowed, her hands stiff over the controls. “Yes, ma’am.”

The hatch slid away. Kasumi stepped lightly onto the regolith, and promptly disappeared.

Shepard gave her to a count of fifty. Her boots landed on the ground in a great plume of dust, falling in perfect parabolas through the nearly airless sky.

Jacob wriggled his feet. “Gravity extends all the way across the base. Nice.”

That would make their approach considerably easier. “Make for the main hab. Our primary objective is to separate the geth from control of the weapon systems.”

“Roger that.” Zaeed hefted his rifle. A new one, this time— he had brought an astonishing quantity of firearms aboard with his other equipment. He spent all his spare time maintaining them. Shepard had met men like that before, and they did inevitably seem to be men, and knew enough to leave it alone.
“What’s that?” Jacob nodded at another ship, a little ways off.

Shepard followed his gaze, and blinked. “That’s quarian script.”

She couldn’t read a letter of it, but recognized the shape easily enough. Hardly more than a shuttle, it looked worse for wear, but scarcely disabled. Zaeed glanced at her. “Maybe we’ve found the geth’s motivation.”

That sat like an uncomfortable truth. “That makes this colony just collateral damage.”

Jacob cleared his throat. “Kasumi’s waiting. I’m sure it’ll get clearer inside.”

Almost as if summoned, Kasumi came over the radio. “The hallway splits twenty meters in. Right leads deeper into the complex.”

Shepard led them to the hatch, which Kasumi had left ajar, the faint shimmer of a mass effect field all that held in the air. No sign of an alarm. Shepard put her hand to her ear. “Hostiles?”

“Nothing yet.” A pause, less a hesitation and more like she’d been interrupted. “Their radio is fascinating, though. You’d like it. Very odd translation, and more jokes than I expected.”

“Noted.” She continued onward, turning right per her directions. It was like every other prefab defensive hab she’d ever seen, built of dirty dented metal and rugged plastic, lighting irregular. The passageway widened out into a locker room for colonial staff. “There was a fight here.”

Bullet holes peppered the locker doors, and personal belongings and stock gear dotted the floor like confetti.

“Body,” Zaeed remarked, tipping up an overturned bench with the toe of his boot. A tangled pile of uniforms sheeted off it, half covering the corpse. “And another here.”

Jacob touched one of the doors. It twisted and fell off its hinges. “So they killed the staff as they found them. No time for an alert.”

“Then why just these two?” asked Zaeed. “If it was a watch change, there’d be at least a half dozen more, an outpost this size.”

“The colony may not know what’s going on.” Shepard frowned. “There’s still no obvious motive here.”

Zaeed grunted. “Don’t know. Don’t care. There’s another hatch back here.”

Shepard wasn’t quite as inclined to let it go, but it was clear this room held no answers. “Right. Let’s move.”

Just then, Oyama made contact, on a local channel. They were in strict radio silence from the Normandy, but the shuttle still had all its sensors tuned up. “The geth ship’s gone. Disappeared to FTL.”

“They left these geth behind?”

“It seems so. Cut their losses, I guess. Normandy’s a considerable threat.”

Shepard chewed her lip. Something was wrong. Something she couldn’t quite puzzle out.

She took point moving into the next corridor, holding her rifle ready and watching for the slightest
sign of movement. But it was as empty as the rest of the place. They were headed for the missile silos, buried deep beneath the lunar soil, accessible only from this bunker. For certain the geth couldn’t take the missiles out this way. And if they intended to use them, surely they would have fired already.

Her comm lit up. Kasumi again. “Shepard, you need to see this.”

“On my way.” Her omni-tool told her exactly where Kasumi waited. She was stoic as ever in the face of whatever waited in the next room, but her expression bore a certain rigidity that warned Shepard it would be bad. “What have we got?”

She shook her head, hood wagging. She’d removed her breather. “A few more colony militia. And a pair of quarians.”

“Quarians? Why they’d leave their ship?”

A shrug. “Maybe they were trying to help. Or take shelter from the geth.”

Shepard glanced back at Jacob. “Watch our six. I’m going in.”

The hatch jerked open, its motion broken and erratic. Shepard slipped inside. The overhead lights were offline. She flipped on her gun-mounted flashlight, and flicked its beam into the gloom. Her eyes widened.

Along the back wall, a dozen or more bodies were piled so thickly Shepard could have used them as a bench.

More, she decided, with clinical certainty. The volume of blood seeping from the pile alone pointed to more than twelve. Hundreds of bullet holes pockmarked the bulkhead.

This wasn’t a battle. This was a mass execution.

“What the hell?” she muttered, just under her breath.

“Shepard,” Jacob called, from the hallway. Concerned though not particularly urgent.

She tore her eyes from the carnage. “What?”

“Got another quarian out here. This one’s still alive.” A pause. “ Barely.”

They found the woman lying around the corner, hands pressed against multiple gunshot wounds scattered across her torso. Shepard squatted in front of her. “Can I help?”

The quarian shook her head. Her mouthpiece lit briefly, but no sound emerged. She swallowed and tried again. “Too late. We…”

She broke off in a coughing spate. Shepard supported her shoulders. “Easy, easy. What are quarians doing here?”

“Going… home…” Her hand clutched Shepard’s arm with unexpected strength, shoving her faceplate close, her eyes two pinpricks of light. “Must deactivate. Not safe. Rael…”

“We’ll deal with the geth.”

She relaxed, her hand sliding away. “ Tried to… protect… too many geth, found our…”
Shepard took a wild leap. “You tried to hide the colonists.”

A nod. “Not prepared for… geth. Too many…”

Her head rolled sideways, breaking eye contact, sparks slowly dimming. Her body relaxed into its final breath.

“Well, shit.” Shepard straightened. “We still don’t know why they’re here.”

Jacob glanced down the hall. “I’m with Zaeed. We can figure it out later.”

“Yeah.” She got on her radio. “Kasumi?”

“Shep, I found your robot pals.” Her voice lower than usual, even for her. “They’re leaving the comm room.”

“The comm room?”

“They’re headed for the missile silo.”

“Shit.” She checked her rifle and sprinted down the hall.

They got more bad news as they ran. Miranda broke radio silence. “Shepard, they’re opening the missile bays.”

“That’s why they left the group here behind, to finish the job.” Shepard sucked in a breath. “If they launch, is there anything Normandy can do?”

A brief pause. In the background, Shepard heard Joker arguing. Something about the limits of their stealth movement capability. Miranda said, “We’re discussing it now.”

“Roger that.” Shepard focused on increasing her speed. Naturally tall and with a long stride, she could cover a lot of ground once she got moving. Her squad trailed behind her.

“Turn right,” Kasumi called.

Shepard followed her direction and found herself facing a sealed hatch. She thumped it with her gloved fist. “Damn it.”

Kasumi knelt by the interface. “It’s just locked. They didn’t disable it.”

As she worked on the lock, Shepard paced behind her, arms crossed, impatient. Her radio crackled. Miranda. “Five missiles are away.”

She put her hand to her ear. “Do you have a heading?”

EDI replied, her artificial voice as calm as ever. “Missiles inbound to the city of Camaso. Camaso has the highest population density of the three settled areas. Estimated time to impact: 47 minutes, 18 seconds.”

Modern technology allowed even subluminal travel to achieve incredible speeds. But space was vast. “These are legal missiles?”

“Correct. Onboard mass effect fields will limit the impact damage to conventional yields. It is unlikely the geth were able to physically access the missiles to modify this protocol.”
“Does Camaso have any kind of missile defense?”

“Unknown, but unlikely, given the defensive facilities present on Franklin.” A pause. “They are preparing a second launch.”

“I’ve got the hatch,” Kasumi said, as the indicator flashed green.

Shepard readied her rifle and tagged it open.

A long narrow room looked out over the silo. Three geth crowded a console. They barely had a confused moment to look up before Shepard opened fire.

She cleared the hatch quickly, to allow her team access, but never stopped shooting as she advanced. The nearest geth fell—a nice clean shot through its flashlight head as her shield failed. She switched targets.

The remaining two geth hopped sideways and fired back. But she’d driven them back from the launch console.

“Twelve o’clock,” Zaeed said, unnecessarily, firing past her two. From a rear hatch, geth boiled into the room. Several of them made a beeline for the console.

Shepard changed targets again. “Jacob.”

“On it.” Jacob made a gesture. Two geth lifted into the air and began to drift in their direction.

There was no cover worth having anywhere. And Shepard now had the geth’s full attention. It was all she could do to keep up any kind of barrage, something—anything—to stop them getting their act together and bringing down her shield.

Kasumi popped out of thin air with the barest shimmer and shot a geth in the back. She was maybe two good steps from the console.

Shepard’s rate of fire slowed ever so slightly. Her clip was starting to go, but that was no reason to lose her calm. “Kasumi. The launch keys.”

She bobbed her head and darted ahead. Her hand closed over the key—a plastic stick the length of her forearm—and gave it a quarter turn to pull it loose. Then the first of the geth relief made it to the console.

Kasumi and the geth went down in a tangle of limbs. The key squirted loose. Shepard ran for it, but just as she began to lunge, her shield failed. She wound up belly-down on the floor, scrambling for the scant protection of the wall with everything in her.

Shepard scooted towards the console, making herself as small and oblique a target as possible. The key lay just out of reach.

Kasumi wriggled out from under the geth, like an eel, her legs slipping free of his grasping hands. She reached for the key. The geth caught her foot and yanked her back; it skidded another few meters forward. Kasumi fell on her knee, hard, with a rough cry.

Shepard reached forward and dragged her into her meager alcove. A moment later Zaeed nailed the geth, a lucky shot that hit its curved neck. It twitched violently. Shepard exchanged her thermal clip.
Jacob stepped in and easily retrieved the key. Straightened and fired. “Where are they all coming from?”

Shepard popped up over the console. The number of geth had somehow doubled. She shot one, felling it after several rounds, but another immediately took its place.

They had the launch key. The sensible thing would be to fall back, and call for reinforcements from the colony. They could probably disable the hatch and get away clean.

A bullet ricocheted off the console. She shot back at its owner without thinking. The geth already had a series of missiles headed for the colony— damn right they’d finish this here and now.

Zaeed pulled back against the opposite wall with a grunt as his shield collapsed. Spat the thermal clip out of his rifle and slapped in a fresh one, grimacing all the while. Kasumi leaned out of their small shelter and lent him some cover fire.

Jacob sent another pair towards the ceiling. A barrier had replaced his shield, shimmering over his hardsuit. That wasn’t a good sign. They were all reaching their limit for an open fight; time to end this.

Kasumi vanished, and reappeared at the front of the throng, taking out a geth before disappearing once more in the shimmer of her masking field. But if Shepard could track it, so could their enemies— and Kasumi fell out of her cloak with a muffled curse as her shield absorbed several bullets in rapid sequence.

Shepard ran into the fray. Her fist connected with the geth’s chest, effectively stopping the assault on Kasumi, and while it was still off-balance she hooked her leg behind his leg and yanked hard. As it went down, it clawed at her armor, catching on her greave and sticking. She stumbled and only barely avoided being dragged down with it, fumbling at her weapon.

A pop of static and Kasumi was there, firing into its chest. Shepard ripped out its hand as it went limp, turned and shot at yet another.

“We’re overrun,” Jacob called, panting into the comm.

Her gaze caught something on the ceiling. “No. No, we have them exactly where we want them.”

Pivoting in place, she charged towards the back of the room, straight into the throng of geth reinforcements. Hand-to-hand with machines, stronger and taller and tireless, was suicide in ‘83. But those odds looked different from the other side of death. Now, they were just one more thing in her way.

Her brain entered the zone. Shepard always liked combat, but sometimes, when the stars aligned, it got like this, where her brain went into a meditative state and there was only action and response and the eons between the two. Everything seemed to slow. Her rifle butt came down a geth’s shoulder. In the same space, another reached for her neck; she ducked and swept its feet out from under it. Came up driving her skull into the belly of a third. It capitulated over her head and rolled off her back. She surged forward.

The console was unguarded. None of the geth imagined anyone would make it through, or care about the internal controls for the facility, not with the launch controls so much nearer and more vital.

By now, her squad had noticed her change in direction, and backed her up without questioning it. That almost gave her pause, almost pulled her out of the moment. Because this felt so much like
chasing Saren. The squad an oiled machine itself, watching each other’s backs in perfect synchronization. And she’d missed it. From the very bottom of her soul, she’d missed it.

Shepard broke through the far side of the knot of geth and sprinted to the console.

None followed. They were too busy exchanging rounds with her squad.

The GUI was as confusing as expected. Technology was never intuitive for her. But she found the crane, and flipped it on.

A huge humming filled the room. A few of the geth glanced up, but it was far too late to save them. The electromagnetic clamp descended from the ceiling as the geth flew up to meet it, and they collided in mid-air, geth sparking as the magnetic field fried out their hardware. Shepard moved it down the room, collecting strays as they tried to run.

Her squad scattered too, moving out of their way, not eager to be caught between geth and magnet. It was all over in a few minutes. Time caught up to her, and Shepard sagged against the console, mopping the sweat off her face. Her limbs ached. She’d have a new set of bruises come the morning. But it felt good, felt productive. Whatever Cerberus had done to this body, her physical strength had only grown.

With a grin, she sauntered forward, into the shadow of the crane. A hum skittered over her skin. It was the only warning she got.

One more step and a surge of something searing rushed through her, a throbbing stabbing pulse that transcended pain. Her entire world shrank to the rivers of fire lacing her limbs. She might have screamed, but her lungs couldn’t gather air, and her mouth was forced open as every muscle contracted down to minimum extent and kept trying to go further.

And then it was over. Her senses came back online one by one. Floor, hard. Lying on her stomach. Lungs rasping, lifting the weight of her body. Taste of blood in her mouth.

She spat it out. Scraping her tongue against her teeth, realizing that she’d bit it. Jacob behind her—must have dragged her away. She couldn’t even sit up.

Geth bodies rained down in thuds as Kasumi disengaged the clamp. Motes scattered into nothing as the last of the field died, like the images that appeared when she squeezed her eyes shut too tight.

Footsteps over the concrete. Kasumi squatted down, pushing her face into view. “Are you alright?”

Her voice didn’t work on the first try. “F-fucking Cerberus.”

Kasumi’s face clouded. Behind Shepard, Jacob said, “I guess cybernetics and strong electromagnetic fields don’t mix. Better let the doc know.”

Her muscles were still twitching. Didn’t mix. What an understatement.

Beyond Kasumi, Zaeed bent and retrieved the launch key. Maybe where Jacob had dropped it when she charged the geth. He tossed it once, looked over at her. “Hell of a thing. Too bad the colony’s still lost.”

The five missiles already launched. Right. Shepard activated her comm, wincing as a small lick of fire ran up her neck to her ear, an aftershock. “Ground to Normandy, come in.”
“Shepard, those missiles are still inbound.” Miranda’s voice was tight.

Shepard tried to shake off the last of the phantom spiders running up and down her skin. “Ideas? Can we use the cyberwarfare suite?”

“Negative. The missiles are ballistic.” Miranda paused, listening to something off-comms. “EDI has a thought about diverting them with the stealth drive.”

The Normandy propelled itself in stealth mode by creating pockets of gravitational potential and “falling” into them. Shepard had no idea how they might be created out of the path of the ship, or persist for long enough to divert a missile, but then, she wasn’t a spaceship. “If you can do it without risking the ship.”

“Standby. This will take some time.”

Jacob got her attention. “Commander, we should see about that quarian ship while we wait.”

“Right.” Stumbling a bit as she got her feet moving, Shepard headed back out of the facility, her team trailing in her wake.

When they arrived at the vessel, barely large enough to be called a ship, she circled it slowly at some distance. “Kasumi, can you give it a quick scan?”

She blinked at her through her helmet visor. “What am I looking for?”

“Booby traps.” Shepard glanced back at it. “One time, my squad boarded a merc ship where the hatch was rigged to blow. It was a miracle nobody died. I’d rather not test my luck twice.”

“Roger that.” Kasumi seemed just as reluctant. She approached the ship with caution and began her inspection.

Ten minutes later, she gave them a thumb’s up, and they cycled the hatch. Shepard poked her head inside. “No atmosphere. Somebody cut life support.”

Jacob ran his gloved finger over a frost-flecked bulkhead. “Cold as hell, too.”

Zaeed had spotted something else. “Rear compartment could still be sealed.”

He walked over and banged on the hatch. Shepard pressed her helmet to the wall, but heard no reply. “Get it open.”

After another quick check by Kasumi, Zaeed readied his rifle, and tagged the hatch. It opened onto more airless silence.

“Geth,” he said, not in warning, but in surprise.

Shepard looked over his shoulder. “Parts of them, anyway.”

The compartment was littered with computer equipment and pieces of geth. Not just chassis, but internal components, motherboards, wiring, even several memory cores. Jacob glanced around as they moved inside. “What the hell?”

Kasumi went to a piece of equipment and flicked it on. Nearby, a memory core lit up. “Signal generator. They were researching geth. Why?”

Shepard watched the core brighten. “Turn it off.”
“It’s just a recording unit—”

“Turn it off.” Letting out a breath as she complied. “I think we know where the geth came from.”

She was horrified. “They wouldn’t have brought active geth into a lab this small.”

“I expect their activation wasn’t on the plan.”

Zaeed grunted. “Not a chance that many geth came out of this ship. Some of them were a landing party from their aerial support.”

“Kasumi found them in the comm room. They may have called in the reinforcements.” That explained why this tableau took days to play out.

He didn’t buy it. “Then why’d their ship run off?”

There were a lot of possible reasons. But the one that rang loudest in her mind was it didn’t.

“Fuck.” Shepard got on her comm, and sent again to the Normandy. “Joker, we’ve got a problem.”

Before he could reply, Oyama cut in with a burst of static. “Shepard, another ship just dropped onto ladar. Coming in hot.”

The geth would target the shuttle straightaway. “Oyama, get your ass out of there.”

“Negative. You’re sitting ducks at the base.” She took a breath. “Powering up now.”

Jacob made for the hatch. “She’ll never make it.”

Shepard hurried out after him, eyes to the sky. A blip of silver, larger than a star and growing every second. And on the ground, their shuttle starting to rise off the dust sea, slowly, too slowly. “Oyama, I gave you an order.”

“I got this.” The shuttle began creeping forward.

Overhead, the blip resolved into a smear, and a brighter prick of light appeared at its bow. “Oyama!”

The torpedo streaked down and blew a new crater into Franklin’s ancient surface. A small earthquake rolled through the ground, knocking them all back and blowing the quarian ship onto its side. Shepard gave herself a shake, adrenaline burying the alarms of bruises old and new, and tried to peer through the plume of dust.

“Shepard!” Jacob jumped on her—pain blooming across her shoulders—and pulled her down. A hail of rocks and dust rained over them, in the shadow of the ship’s meager protection.

She didn’t care. She lifted her head as much as she could, straining for any sign of the shuttle. Started to scrabble forward as soon as it ended, Jacob hauling at her with futility. “It’s too hot, you’ll melt your boots—”

Then her comm crackled. Joker. “*Normandy* to Shuttle 1. What the hell are you doing?”

“Distracting them.”

Oyama. Shepard closed her eyes and sagged. From inside the quarian ship, Zaeed and Kasumi
cursed over the comm, trying to find a way to lever themselves out.

Then Joker spoke to her. “Commander, the shuttle has no maneuverability. She’s going to be paste if we don’t do something.”

And she answered without hesitation. “Get that geth ship out of my sky.”

“Roger that.”

Miranda came on the line. “Shepard, we’ve re-directed three of the five missiles. There’s a real chance we won’t get the last two if we stop now.”

“What’s their heading?”

EDI, as ever, was the calmest presence in the discussion. “The fourth missile will strike the agricultural district with a probability of 88%. This will require the colony to significantly increase their trade to avoid starvation over the next two years, but civilian casualties are unlikely.”

“Fine.” She’d convince Hackett to send them aid if she had to. Or Cerberus, even. “And the other?”

“The other has a 91% probability of impacting at the spaceport. Casualties will be high, and the colony will be unable to continue.”

Shepard glanced at the quarian ship. “Go get Oyama. I have an idea for the last missile.”

Miranda confirmed the order. “Our target is the geth ship. Changing course.”

Zaeed had managed to free himself, and was trying to help Kasumi out, but the angle was awkward. Shepard started walking back. “We have to get this ship right-side up.”

Jacob shook his head. But Kasumi, still trapped in the shuttle, answered. “If EDI can turn off the gravity, we might be able to right it with the thruster system.”

“EDI?” Shepard asked.

“The system encryption is not robust. Local artificial gravity systems should be disabled momentarily.”

The three of them stood clear, Shepard still glancing every so often at that smoking crater. Nothing on the moon’s surface could burn, but feather-light dust would be drifting off it for days or weeks to come, as the rock cooled and contracted. Kasumi found the controls, and with only a few near-mishaps, got it settled on its belly. They all crowded on board, and Shepard shut the hatch, reaching for a ceiling support to brace herself. “Head towards that missile. Normandy sent us a heading.”

Kasumi shook her head and initiated launch. “You understand this ship can’t survive that sort of hit?”

“It’s not going to survive. But we will.”

Zaeed frowned. “If you’re planning what I think you’re planning, you’re crazier than even your reputation suggests.”

“I don’t get it,” Jacob said.
Shepard took a breath. “We’re going to get close enough to set a collision course. Then we’re going to bail out.”

His voice went up the scale. “What?”

“The *Normandy* can pick us up.”

“If we get caught in the debris field—”

“We won’t.” She sounded more confident than she felt.

Kasumi’s voice was dry. “And here I thought the Collectors were the suicide mission.”

They flew on. The quarian ship, an interstellar craft, had a considerably higher intra-system top speed than a ballistic missile, even if they had to disable a security protocol to reach it this close to a planet. Shepard wagered these munitions were only ever meant to be fired at close range, at a hostile ship. Certainly not aimed at the distant colony below.

As they approached, Kasumi announced. “Course is set. Disengaging auto-pilot.”

Because of course the auto-pilot would avoid collisions where it could. Shepard popped the hatch. “Then it’s time for us to get out of here. But first…”

She’d spent a little time searching the ship’s stores. The most useful item for what she intended was a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher, hidden among the ship’s various smaller arms. God knew why they had it, but it helped them now. “Everyone needs to cluster up and hang on to each other. We’ll jump out together.”

Once they were outside the ship, they’d have no way to move themselves around. Their suits were not equipped with maneuverability units.

They all got uncomfortably close. But there wasn’t time to be embarrassed. “On three.”

She counted down. They leapt away. Then two of the four kicked hard at the hull, creating more distance. Such a minor impact was unlikely to put the ship off course.

Shepard ensured she was at the front. Now she hauled the rocket launcher into position. “Hang on tight.”

She fired it. The quarian ship streaked past them, their own forward momentum slowed by the rocket. After a moment, she reloaded and fired again. And then a third time. Then she contacted her ship. “Normandy, is the target down?”

Joker responded. “Commander, ma’am, closing on target now.”

She couldn’t see either ship, not from this distance. But they all saw the explosion, a miniature nova against the stars. “Normandy, come in?”

“Target is down.” Joker sounded elated. “I say again, target is down.”


Shepard couldn’t suppress her grin. “That just leaves one. And we need a pick-up.”

“Sending Oyama now. If her head’s not too puffed up by her heroics.” More than a hint of reproach.
Oyama answered, sounding more shaken than cocky. “Roger that. Inbound now, homing on suit transponders.”

The four of them spread out to wait, keeping hold of hands or belts. Shepard wasn’t entirely sure where to look for the missile explosion. The ship had gone out of sight some time ago. Then Kasumi gasped. “Look—”

The rest of them followed her pointing. Another spark had lit up the night. A moment later, EDI confirmed it. “Fifth missile destroyed.”

Shepard let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “Warn the colony about the fourth. Good job, everyone.”

That distant spark began to fade, a sign that the colony was safe. She closed her eyes, feeling like an N7 marine again for the first time in two years. Good job, indeed.

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Hours later, Shepard stepped out into the chill Watson night, watching the enormous waves bash into the cliffs below as the tide rose. Watson had spectacular tides, not unusual with a moon as close and large as Franklin, but not something she had seen before, either. It wasn’t difficult to guess why the colonists chose to build on a high equatorial island. Flooding must be an enormous issue in the lowlands.

Despite being the colony’s largest city and nominal capital, Camaso remained a large grouping of pre-fab habs, the grassy paths between them now lit only by moonlight. As predicted, the fourth and final missile impacted in the heart of their agricultural fields, but the governor invited them down all the same. The colonists had watched the geth situation play out for several days, helpless to do much of anything. They weren’t affiliated with the Alliance, and their home nations back on Earth could do nothing from all the way across the galactic disc. As the governor explained it, they hoped if they let the geth have what they wanted, they’d go away.

Shepard herself couldn’t fathom why they’d launched at the colony. Maybe just clearing up evidence, that the geth were there at all. Maybe to implicate the quarians. Who could say? She composed an email to Tali anyway, letting her know the fate of the quarians, and asking for information as delicately as she could. Clearly the quarians continued to research the geth, Council sanctions or no.

The colonists were grateful, and had thrown an impromptu celebration in their honor. Shepard was reminded of Feros. Of Ash and the other marines, the ones who’d died down on Alchera’s frozen surface, victims of malfunctioning equipment. Of sitting with Kaidan on the roof that night, after the thorian was destroyed. Good memories, but painful, too. Like sitting in the sun so long it burned. She needed a little space.

She shivered, the biting breeze off the sea making short work of her light clothing, and folded her arms around herself. Enjoying the quiet.

So, of course, only a few minutes later, the hatch disgorged Kelly, an intrusion on her solitude. Shepard tried to keep her irritation from her voice. “Come to check up on me?”

“I didn’t know anyone else was out here.” She laughed. Kelly was rarely ill-at-ease. “I couldn’t eat another bite if I tried, but they keep offering, and won’t take no for an answer.”

Shepard couldn’t help a chuckle herself. “You’d think they’d be more concerned about their
supplies, considering.”

“Miranda went off with the governor an hour ago.” Kelly smiled with something like satisfaction, and crossed her arms. “I think they’ll find Cerberus can offer valuable assistance in this matter.”

She studied her a long moment, the younger woman oblivious as she looked out over the water. “Why the hell are you here?”

Kelly started. “I just wanted some air.”

“No, I meant why are you with Cerberus? You don’t strike me as particularly zealous or xenophobic.”

“Cerberus isn’t xenophobic,” she said, with infinite patience. “If you open a dog shelter, it doesn’t mean you hate cats.”

Shepard snorted, and turned back to the waves. Then, after a moment, hesitantly, Kelly said, “I was in college when Torfan happened.”

That was the last thing Shepard expected. “Pardon?”

“It was my second semester, freshman year.” She bit her lip, hugging herself in the darkness. “They suspended classes. Student protests against the Alliance were blocking access to the buildings.”

“I never understood that.” Shepard shook her head. Not disapproving, but confused. “I don’t bear any ill will towards the batarians, but they were never open to diplomatic solutions. They killed and enslaved our colonists. That couldn’t be allowed to continue.”

“Some of my classmates wondered why we had to encroach on batarian territory to begin with. Surely the galaxy is large enough for both of us.” Kelly said this academically, like she understood the argument and didn’t necessarily disagree, but wanted to appear dispassionate. Then she swallowed. “And then there was… what they did. The Alliance. To the batarians trapped there, and the humans sent in after them.”

Shepard licked her lips. Spoke slowly. “I knew a lot of the people who died in those warrens. The war had to be finished. I don’t know that it had to be finished like that, but I wasn’t there, and I’ve seen enough not to judge from the sidelines.”

“Did you see the pictures?” Kelly glanced at her then, and there was something haunted in her face. “Of the people they pulled out of the ground?”

Shepard had seen the real thing often enough. “Nobody is saying it was good. Least of all me.”

“I…” She touched her mouth. “I adore aliens. I got the opportunity to study abroad later in college, and I did a stint on an asari colony, when I first started working. But I don’t think we should compete with each other. Politically, militarily, we should just all stay in our own space. Nothing good comes from the alternatives.”

“And Cerberus advocates exactly that.” Shepard sighed. “Humanity standing on our own. Growing strong.”

“I wanted to do some good with my life. Helping you defend our colonies fits.” She offered Shepard a smile. Sweet, like Kelly herself.
Shepard remembered then the teenaged girl lying in cold storage, in Nepheron. She had a sweet face, too, one not much younger than Kelly’s. And abruptly she felt very, very old. She raked her fingers backwards through her hair. Impulsively clipped sides tickling at her palm.

Then Kelly switched topics, and came at her from a completely unexpected direction. “Have you heard anything from Commander Alenko?”

Shepard was so startled that she actually looked at Kelly, and her yeoman was too good a shrink to not read her face. She grinned, delighted. “You have, haven’t you.”

That just left her exasperated. She turned back to the sea and crossed her arms. “He sent an email.”

After a moment, all hope and optimism, Kelly said, “And?”

“I don’t know.” It was actually the truest answer she had. But the silence sucked away at her. She shivered in the night as another gust hit them. “It’s hard. Especially at times like this.”

“Times like what?”

“This kind of thing…” She gestured. “This celebration. This mission. It… reminds me of ‘83. Hard to avoid thinking about how he’s not here. It feels all wrong.”


Shepard swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. Somehow managed to keep her voice steady. “I appreciate that you think you’re helping, but this isn’t something I need.”

Kelly nodded. “I understand. I’ve heard it a lot. A psychologist’s job is to point out the things we experience, but can’t voice on our own. Tease out what’s behind however we think we ought to feel.”

She snorted. “And how would you know what I think I should be feeling?”

“You think you should be angry,” she said, with altogether too much clarity. “Or hurt. But mostly you’re just sad, that it came to this. You’ve been short-tempered because you’re completely stopped up with sadness without any idea how to deal with it. It’s what you’ve always done whenever you lost something truly important.”

Managing to convey, somehow, that she spoke of more than just Kaidan. It was a moment before she spoke. “Kelly, no offense, but I kind of wanted a minute to myself.”

“Of course. Don’t stay out too long— it’s a cold night.” And then she disappeared back inside before Shepard could object.

She walked out to the cliffs and sat down on the edge, feeling the distant spray of salt and looking up at Franklin hanging low in the sky through a wisp of clouds.

Kaidan’s email was bullshit. She’d grown more and more annoyed as the day progressed. The apology was nice, but it had a dozen emotions going a hundred different directions, and while that pretty accurately mirrored her own feelings, it wasn’t helpful. It wasn’t even kind. Irrational as it was, the thought of Kaidan with someone else twisted her stomach into sour knots, and that he didn’t think they could resolve things until her mission was over—

Shepard took a deep breath. No, she wasn’t going down that road. Fuck that road. He didn’t get
to set the terms after how he reacted on Horizon.

Instead, she opened her omni-tool, because to hell with caution and secrecy and not doing the things she wanted to do. Not a reply, but a fresh message. At least she’d be simple and direct about what she wanted, without any hedging to muddle her message, even if Kaidan couldn’t manage to do the same.

Activating the camera and raising it to her face, she waited for the optics to adjust to the low light before she snapped the photo. Herself sitting there, in the soft grass, the hab lights twinkling behind her. Not exactly smiling; looking at it in the message body, her face seemed almost wistful. Well, that fit, on a night like this, so close to her old memories.

It was sent without text, only a subject line:  *Wish you were here.*

Then she closed the omni-tool and leaned back on her elbows, staring up at the sky, feeling calm at last. Whatever he made of it was beyond her control, but nothing could be worse than how things were now.

After a few more minutes, she dusted herself off, and went back inside to the party. To people, and noise, and celebration, and as far away from melancholy as she could get.

Chapter End Notes

As is probably clear from the long posting gap, real life has gotten tumultuous for me the past few months. I really wanted to avoid irregular posting with this fic, but sometimes life has other ideas. I have the fic entirely planned out to the end and will not abandon it. I want to read it as badly as anyone! But it's going to be a little slower than I hoped for awhile. Thanks for your patience and continued support. Even when I'm slow to respond to comments, I read them all (often more than once), and deeply appreciate every one.
Reunion

September 2185

They arrived at Illium only shortly behind schedule, circa lunchtime two days after Watson. Shepard slept in— unheard of for her. That stupid dream about Abael continued in force. She blamed the conversation with Kelly.

So she joined Joker on the bridge as they were making their final approach. “We’re cleared to dock?”

“More then. Someone paid our fees.”

“Cerberus, surely.” Even if she wasn’t talking to the Illusive Man, he wouldn’t give up tracking their movements.

“No. Anonymous.” He made a face. “You have friends everywhere.”

She thought about the friends she had on Illium. None of the possibilities were uncomplicated. “Shit.”

“Your problem, not mine.” He engaged the autopilot and eyed her sidelong. “Scuttlebutt has it you used to live here.”

“Sort of.” She sat down next to him, crossing her arms. “It was a long time ago. An old ex-girlfriend. I never officially moved in, which was a subject of much debate.”

“Too difficult with the security problems and everything?” The navy wasn’t keen on personnel claiming a residence outside human space.

“I had a posting just like every other officer.” Though it hadn’t been that simple either.

“You told me once you’ve never had it easy, relationship-wise.” He looked over at her. “Guess that’s true. Still can’t believe Kaidan was still mad on Horizon. Can’t believe he was mad at all.”

Heat crept up her neck. She rubbed at it. “I… didn’t exactly… I hadn’t quite gotten in touch with him. You know. Before.”

“You didn’t TELL HIM?” Joker’s voice rocketed up the scale. “What in the fuck?”

Shepard sank down in her seat, trying to disappear into the leather. “I got this all three times over from Kaidan himself.”

“Who else haven’t you told?” he demanded. “Do your parents know you’re alive?”

Her ears burned. Her silence plenty of a response. Joker reared back. But before he could speak, a voice behind them thundered, “You haven’t told your own mom and dad?”

They both whirled. Gardner stood at the hatch, toolbox in hand, having slipped in while they argued.

Shepard cleared her throat. “I—”
“Sam hell, girl.” He threw down the box with an unholy clank and crossed his arms. “I thought you were decent people!”

Some real pros had tried to intimidate her over the years. They couldn’t touch Gardner’s fury. She felt pinned to the air, like one more word and he could burn her alive.

He shook his finger at her. “You call your momma!”

Then he stalked out, waving his arms and muttering explosive and fanciful curses. Shepard glanced at Joker, as if for a reprieve.

He turned back to the ship’s controls. “Yeah, I don’t think I can add to that.”

EDI chimed in softly. “We are now docked.”

Shepard rose with as much dignity as she could muster. “I’m getting lunch. Want anything?”

At the shake of his head, she all but ran to the airlock, unable to get off the ship fast enough. So distracted she barely noticed the twist in her stomach as she passed into the planet’s gravity at the airlock, twenty percent higher than Earth standard.

Illium was an antithesis to Omega. Clean, spacious, gleaming white, its buildings climbing high into the clouds instead of down into a darkened mining pit. The Nos Astra arcology was among the largest of its kind. In this veritable forest of skyscrapers, the workings of the city, the mass effect generators and climate controls and water pumps, were housed below, in the first several hundred feet of the buildings. The people lived here, above, the altitude alleviating the hot equatorial climate, and the general attitude of the inhabitants reflected this removal.

Only on the Citadel had Shepard encountered people more adrift from the rest of the galaxy. It was hard to say whether this was due to their isolation, or their wealth, because now she could see parallels to Noveria as well. Both served as lucrative trade conduits between the Terminus and Council space.

Standing here, six years later, felt like arriving… not home, but at least like coming back to a place of familiarity and confidence. Something known. That absence was natural, normal. About as normal as her stomach’s constant demands had become since mid-July. She almost wished for the days when something like Gardner’s comments could upset her enough to interfere with her appetite, but as it was, nothing short of her actual clinical death seemed likely to stop it. A more final kind of death. Like an explosive round directly to the cranium.

She bought a takeaway bowl of thick stew and went looking for a kiosk to find an infobroker. Shepard had a few names in mind already. But as she approached a public terminal and paid the nominal fee to browse the list, a different one jumped out at her. “Liara’s here?”

A few other patrons glared at her with disapproval. She couldn’t care less, clicking on Liara’s name, expanding the entry. She’d been registered for a little over six months, at an address Shepard recalled as being very tony, and judging by the fees her listing quoted, well-earned. It prompted a sudden suspicion regarding who may have paid their docking fees—one more welcome than she’d feared.

Shepard slurped down the last of her lunch, copied the information to her omni-tool, and located a taxi stand. All cabs in Nos Astra were automated, just like the Citadel. Unlike there, passengers could override the controls and drive themselves, for a surcharge. Back when, Shepard used to do
that a lot. She desperately missed driving sometimes, living in space. It was the only good thing the ground had to offer.

But this was a short trip, hardly worth the bother, and soon she was deposited at the Nos Astra Stock Exchange, walking distance to Liara’s office. The city at this altitude was a maze of plazas looking out on the boiling hot surface peeking between the clouds, and hallways and hatches leading to warrens within. Advertisements and shops were everywhere.

Liara occupied a prime space, a secluded two-room suite overlooking the open marketplace below. And she could afford a flesh-and-blood personal assistant. Another asari, elegantly dressed, who rose as Shepard entered the small atrium. “Welcome. I’m afraid Dr. T’Soni is not receiving prospective clients today, but I’d be happy to schedule your appointment.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m not a client. Liara’s an old friend. I wanted to stop in and say hello.”

The asari narrowed her eyes, speculative, and then they flew open. A purple flush touched her cheeks—embarrassment. “Of course, Commander Shepard, I should have recognized you.”

Well, that confirmed who paid their docking fees. “Is Liara available?”

“Yes, she’s just finishing up a call. You can go right in.” She reached for the button to unlock the hatch. “My name is Nyxeris. Please let me know if you require anything as you wait.”

“Thank you.” Shepard tagged the hatch and stepped into the office.

It was a semi-circle with a large window comprising its main wall, looking over the trading floor. Liara was talking to a full-scale hologram of a client, who stammered in the face of her wrath. Which was far more intimidating than Shepard remembered. “I’ll make this simple for you, Mr. Nashai. Either you pay me, or I flay you alive. With my mind.”

The man gulped and terminated the transmission.

“Been keeping up with the combat biotics, I see,” Shepard said.

Liara whirled. Her face lit up. “Shepard! Nyxeris, hold my calls.”

Shepard glanced over her shoulder in time to see her assistant bow politely and take her leave, closing the hatch.

Her mouth opened to say something further, but Liara rushed her, wrapping her in a tight hug. And without warning she was back on Horizon, in those few heady moments before everything went wrong. She couldn’t speak, so she just squeezed her, for a moment longer than was strictly necessary.

Liara held onto her forearms as they parted, shaking her head. “My sources on Omega suggested you were alive, but I never…”

Part of her wanted to mention Cerberus now, rip off the band-aid and avoid the same rollercoaster. But her mouth had other ideas. “You look well.”

And she did, in one of the long dresses she used to assume whenever they melded their minds, within the unreal space inside Shepard’s head. Liara scanned her head to toe, taking in her blue jeans, already showing wear, and the “fashionably” faded Noodle House t-shirt she picked up at one of their stops. And surely also the bevy of scars and other alterations. Shepard kept her head up.
“You look…” Liara smiled then, unexpectedly. “Like you survived.”

Shepard honestly hadn’t thought about it that way. It sat better. “Thanks.”

Liara gave her hands another squeeze, and then went and sat at the desk. “You’ll have to forgive me. Helping you stop Saren gave me a certain notoriety, and I’m afraid I’ve traded on that, to start this business.”

“Your official registration said you’ve been an infobroker for six months.” Shepard was untroubled by her leveraging a bad situation. After what happened to Benezia, she was owed.

“On Illium, yes. But I’ve been building my network since shortly after our rescue from Alchera.” She shook her head. “Archaeology… I think I’ll come back to it, one day, but for now I’m still reeling from how knowledge of the reapers overturned so much work.”

“I understand.” Shepard offered a reassuring smile, and sank into the seat across from her. “Liara, you’re brilliant. You should be doing whatever you like.”

But Liara’s own expression faded, into something sadder and more guarded. “I’m afraid it’s not that simple. I needed this network, and the money and influence it accrues. A debt to repay.”

Her brow furrowed. “What sort of debt? If you need help—”

Liara laughed, easily, not mockingly. “I’m sure you have your hands full, helping Cerberus eradicate the Collectors.”

Shepard must have resembled a landed fish, because she chuckled again. “I’m a very good information broker. And of course I’ve been interested in news about you.”

“And you’re… ok with that?” Cautious. Half-expecting another explosion.

“I can’t say it makes me happy. But I know something of the Terminus now. Nobody cares about these colony attacks, nobody who can act, except you. And you’ll do anything it takes.”

“Not anything.” She fidgeted with the hem of her t-shirt.

“Of course. I didn’t mean to imply you are bereft of morality.”

Shepard looked up. Liara’s mouth twitched. She shook her head. “I don’t know if you heard, but Cerberus lured Collectors to Horizon. Ostensibly so we could observe an actual attack, and suss out their capabilities and motives. But all I know is they helped them abduct and kill human colonists.”

“I have heard.” She cocked her head. “But there’s something more. You’re as angry as I’ve ever seen you.”

Was she? As if answering that unspoken question, Liara added, “You’re loud when you’re ticked off. When you go quiet, you’re enraged.”

That felt uncomfortably like truth. Shepard shifted in her seat. “Kaidan was there. They used him as the lure. His connection to me, because the Collectors have been interested in me since I died. Cerberus lured both of us.”

“Goddess.” Her eyes went wide. “I’d heard Kaidan was with the Alliance team, but I never guessed—”
“Yeah.” Shepard cleared her throat. “He’s fine. We stopped the attack.”

“Have you heard from him?”

She’d gotten a response to her email that morning. A photo of him looking out over Zakera Ward; she wasn’t certain, but she thought it was near the Alliance base. It read simply *Me, too.* “It’s… we had a fight.”

She pursed her lips. “I see.”

“But that’s why I’m here,” Shepard said, returning to the point. “Horizon eliminated my confidence in Cerberus intelligence. I came to Illium looking for a Shadow Broker contact.”

“You don’t trust Cerberus after they used Kaidan.”

“They tried to kill Kaidan.” And just then, she sounded as angry as she was, enough heat to set fire to the air itself. “The Illusive Man doesn’t like recalcitrance. I’m certain he hoped Kaidan would die, so I’d be distracted from my distrust of Cerberus. If he wants his ship back, I’d like to see him try, but I’m not doing a damned thing more for him.”

“I wouldn’t have expected any other reaction.” Liara sat forward, her hands on the desk. “Perhaps we can help each other. I’m also looking for the Shadow Broker.”

That startled her. “What, the Broker himself? Herself?”

“Yes,” she said, simply. Then she got up and turned towards the window, her face reflected in the glass. “He captured someone close to me. A friend. It was my fault, Shepard. And I don’t know whether he’s alive, or whether that’s the better option for him.”

Shepard watched her reflection, the way her mouth tightened and her eyes lowered. “I won’t lie. The Illusive Man is at the top of my hit list, after this is over, for Kaidan and Akuze and all the shit they did to me these past two years, without my consent. I understand how you feel. And I’ll help, if I can.”

“I don’t know what you could do.” She turned back then, composed once more. “This isn’t a matter of strength at arms. I need better data sources.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for example, I’ve found some evidence that the Broker’s agents are transmitting coded messages through trades on the Nos Astra Exchange.” She gestured out her window, to the plaza below, where trading continued all hours of the day. “But I can’t afford a professional financial services terminal to collect and analyze such a large dataset, and access is tightly controlled by the corporations who do have them.”

Shepard sat back, and bit her lip, debating whether to say anything for a long minute. Nehal was the last person she wanted to see. But Liara was family. And after the high of saving Hackett’s colony, there was an urge to do something wholesome, untainted by Cerberus. “I… may have a solution. Emphasis on maybe.”

“Oh?” Her interest was immediate. “If you’re proposing Cerberus funding, I—”

“No, nothing like that.” She sighed. “I spent a lot of time on Illium, years ago, because my girlfriend at the time lived here. As far as I know, she still does. She’s an executive with Baria Frontiers.”
Liara turned eagerly to her terminal. “What’s her name?”

“Nehal Nagarajan.”

She stopped typing and stared. “You used to date the vice president of Baria Frontiers.”

“For the Illium division, yeah.”

Liara opened her mouth. Closed it. Her brow wrinkled. “How in the world did you meet?”

And Shepard actually chuckled, because that memory at least was sweet. “Racing motorcycles.” Then, at her continued confusion, “I was out on medical leave thanks to a broken leg. A lot of make-work. I got sent to a conference on Demeter, got bored and blew it off, traded in the rental car for something more interesting. Got challenged by this woman on the street and ended up dating her for almost three years.”

“You haven’t really done things by the book, have you.” Liara couldn’t help a small smile. “Or at least I was given to understand that seducing a junior officer was at least as reckless as street racing.”

It was obviously in jest, but with the argument so fresh, Shepard didn’t know how to respond. Certainly she wasn’t prepared to laugh. So the silence grew. Shepard slouched down in her seat, and folded her arms over her stomach. “Did you guys keep up, while I was… over the past two years?”

“A little. Not as much as we should have.” Liara dusted the desk, delicately, dislodging a few invisible motes. Distracting herself from looking at Shepard for a long moment. “I last saw him a little over a month ago. We were…”

Her eyebrows rose. “You were what?”

Liara stood and returned to the window, twisting her fingers together. “Looking for you.”

The bottom fell out of her world, and left her floundering. “I don’t understand. Why would you… You knew? You couldn’t…”

“We found out about Project Lazarus.” She turned, her face drawn tight. Anticipating her reaction. “I thought I could locate the station. But we found only wreckage.”

Shepard’s head sank into her hand. She rubbed at her temples, feeling a headache coming on. “Cerberus destroyed the station after it was overrun by an insurgent.”

“Dr. Wilson, yes. I confirmed later that he was working for a third party. A woman named Hope Lillium.” Liara cleared her throat. “We recovered a number of Cerberus files, but absolutely nothing indicating you survived the attack.”

Kaidan’s expression when he first saw her on Horizon, that odd mix of elation and trepidation. This was its origin, in the dark of interstellar space, amid a cooled wreck and log after log documenting in excruciating detail her violation and humiliation at the hands of Cerberus.

Shepard shut her eyes. Liara kept on talking. “I did not take the absence of that information as definitive. You’ve survived worse than a simple station assault. But Kaidan… He insisted…”

“What?” But a part of her already knew. Where have you been? he’d asked, desperate and hurt in a way she hadn’t quite understood.
Liara clasped her hands behind her back. “He swore if you were alive, nothing would stop you from contacting him. Us. He left certain you were dead.”

When Kaidan saw her on Horizon, she’d just died all over again, the grief as fresh as after Alchera. She stared down at Liara’s desk.

Then Liara touched her shoulder, tentative. Shepard hadn’t even realized she moved. “I can’t imagine what this feels like. But... I’m glad you’re here. Truly.”

She eyed her. “You don’t have a single question for me.”

“I have hundreds. But...” Liara shook her head, and perched on the edge of the desk. “To get rescued from Alchera, Kaidan and Joker had to launch in a makeshift shuttle and find the main antenna from the ship. But the Normandy was in pieces. He told me that for months after you passed, he had a nightmare about nosing through that wreckage, looking for you. Hearing you call out for him, running short of air, and never finding you.”

She paused, as if allowed Shepard the opportunity to respond. Shepard could not imagine what she could possibly say. So after a moment, Liara said, “My grief took different forms, but I knew that sourness, in the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t get it out of my mind.”

Shepard looked up at her at last. Liara wore an expression pinched with worry. “Why are you telling me this?”

Her fingers twisted together again. “I want you to understand. How terribly we— I—missed you.”

“Self-flagellation doesn’t suit me.” Shepard got up and walked several paces, crossing her arms. Surly. Unsure why Liara was guiltling her like this, unhappy to have that wound opened.

“That is not my intent.” She took a breath. “I was able to locate Lazarus Station because I’d been there before.”

A shiver ran through her. A trickle of icy suspicion. She half-turned, hoping not to see it on her face. “Stop.”

Liara held herself stiffly, without a trace of denial. “I went looking for your body. I couldn’t stand that we left you there, like a piece of space garbage. And then Cerberus... made an offer.”

“Stop!” She got to her feet. Her hands had curled into fists, nails biting into her palms. Realizing quite abruptly that she was about two words away from physically attacking her, so full of betrayal and shock that the anger sat lurking in the background, nearly unnoticed.

Liara’s mouth snapped shut. The skin around her knuckles had whitened, she was so tense and still.

Shepard gave herself a single violent shake and turned to the door. “This was a mistake.”

Liara made a little sound, reached out towards her. Shepard fixed her with a steel glare. Voice low and hard. “Don’t.”

And she stalked from the room before Liara could offer a word of protest, Nyxeris rising in surprise as she swept past. Then she was moving through the floor of the exchange, unconsciously maneuvering towards a bridge that would take her out of this district.

She stumbled along, hunched in on herself, all but dripping blood onto the walkway. So wounded
it was shocking nobody had noticed. Liara, Liara… that was as big a gut punch as Kaidan’s rejection on Horizon, and less expected. Dammit, Liara saw Cerberus’ handiwork. She heard Shepard say she never wanted to be kept alive like that, a vegetable, an experiment. And she hadn’t cared, any more than Miranda, or the Illusive Man, or the Alliance who left her rotting over Alchera, or Kaidan who judged and sentenced her with barely a question. There wasn’t a soul left in the universe she could trust.

Her heart felt so broken that only pulp remained. Raggedly blurring, making do.

But no respite existed. Life remained relentless as ever. And if her sore mind turned away from Liara, there was Nehal, waiting. That was three years of her life she’d fucked up. She’d buried it too, in more ways than one, yet here it came, clawing its way back out of the earth.

This whole misadventure was a mistake. Illium was too close, with too many memories. Never in her life had she so craved somewhere anonymous. A real nowhere land, a place that roused no associations.

A torpedo had blown through her psyche. That infamous compartmentalization, the skill that had even her closest colleagues whispering *robot* behind her back, vaporized. More than what Cerberus did. Like her walls had collapsed and left her life utterly exposed. Bare and quivering among the ashes as she walked among these experiences, piling them up her arms, too many to hold, slipping and falling as soon they were gathered. All she could offer was the meager shelter of her ragged body as they spilled onto the ground. Kaidan and Nehal and Todd. A cold slab in a medical lab and a ship crawling through the empty void and Ash falling beneath a tide of geth and six days on Aonia and thresher maws in the night and… How far back did it go? When had she ever not been like this? What hadn’t she locked away, and what had she ever dealt with, really?

Her stomach rumbled. The damn stew gone already, uncaring of how sick and sad she felt. Maybe that was the unwanted biotics. Kaidan had a bottomless stomach.

And there was another little twist of the knife, courtesy of nothing at all.

“Fuck everything,” she said, aloud, exploding without conscious intent. Several people offered startled glances.

An Osteria Iarix appeared up ahead. Shepard always made time for that particular café when she came to Illium, a kind of Italian-Armali fusion place that was the fever dream of an asari chef and her human wife. They had six locations across Nos Astra the last time Shepard visited, and maybe a favorite treat would distract her from the ruins of her self.

As she waited in line for her sandwich, Shepard glanced at the vid terminals scattered amidst the concourse, craving any change of subject. All the major networks claimed a spot, including ANN. Daytime news out of human space hadn’t gotten any less banal since ’83. Loads of puff pieces.

Luck was not with her. Just as she reached the counter, the broadcast shifted. “Captain Hannah Shepard, mother of the late human spectre, Commander Shepard, has turned down an admiral’s star and will remain in command of the *Orizaba.*”

At the speaking of Hannah’s name, Gardner’s accusation came back. It was long past any decent
excuse. She just didn’t want anyone to see her broken like this.

But then they flashed a picture on the screen. Her boots froze to the ground. She stared at the vid terminal, begging the broadcast to cut to an interview, anything to let her hear her mother’s voice, gripped by a need far more primal than pride.

The reporter, cruel beyond belief, simply continued to read off her teleprompter, wrapping up a minor story before cutting to commercial. “Captain Shepard deemed her promotion a political ploy and said that she could best honor her daughter’s legacy by captaining a ship. That’s all for this edition of Fleet Beat—”

“Ma’am?” prompted the clerk, awaiting her order.

Shepard blinked. Turned to her. The clerk tried again. “What can I get you?”

“Sorry,” she said, and walked out, dazed.

Her mother, her mother, oh god her mother, this iron rod of a woman who lived and breathed her career in way her daughter learned all too well— her mother turned down a promotion. Out of grief and love and the same furious indignation Shepard felt herself whenever the navy tried to wring a few brownie points from her own sweat and blood.

Her mother, who thought she was dead.

And that was the one too many. For the month, for the year, maybe for her whole life. She couldn’t stand this alienation a second longer.

Her feet moved without any conscious thought. Clumsy at first, confused by their unconscious direction. Then faster, breaking into a jog and then a run as her mind caught up to where they were going.

She didn’t stop until she reached a public comm. Voice only, by long unthinking habit, knowing the navy assessed vid calls at a rate of 1.3 minutes per every minute of comm time, to make up for the extra bandwidth. It ate into the crew’s limited allotment of personal minutes.

Shepard synced the terminal to her omni-tool, to the comm in her ear. Supplied in the required information. Reached the Orizaba VI and submitted her mother’s PCC— her personal contact code, the string of numbers given only to close family or friends. Meant for emergencies, really. Shepard felt strongly that this qualified. But she also had a fleeting shade of being eight and invoking the PCC because she’d saved up her math homework for four weeks and it was all due the next morning. Her ears still stung from the ghost of her mother’s lecture.

She held her breath, hand to comm. A minute passed. Then ten. Clutching the terminal and ignoring the crowds milling on the street behind her, knowing that in truth this was a good sign and the wait meant somebody was bringing her mother. Unable to resist assuming that she’d never arrive. It took quite a lot more than one personal call from an anonymous terminal to relieve Hannah of her duty.

Then the connection crackled. “This is Hannah Shepard. Who is this?”

Her carefully prepared script vanished from her mind. She opened her mouth, but couldn’t make her throat push the air.

“Hello?” her mother said again, with the faintest hint of irritation. She’d drop the link soon.
Her hand pressed into the wall so hard she was sure she’d have scratches across her palm. Her mouth blurted out the only word it could remember. “Momma?”

A full three seconds of silence on the other end. Then a stricken haunted voice, more a breath than a name. “Nathaly?”

“Mom,” she said again, and then to her complete and absolute horror, she burst into tears.

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Time passed. Other users came and went from this bank of terminals, giving the sobbing woman folded into the second booth a wide berth. It was a small irony that personal comms, ill-equipped for the complexities of interstellar communications, in a galactic community, had restored a such a relic of the past.

Shepard rested her whole weight against the cold concrete forming the main wall of the booth. Utterly spent. And confused. Not once in her entire life, up to and including her early childhood, had she ever done something like that. Blubbered on and on without a pause for breath or thought about every last thing that was hurt or wrong until there wasn’t a drop of passion left in her body.

Even stranger, her mother… listened. With the occasional sympathetic noise, but otherwise just let her talk until she ran out of words. And then she asked questions. No demands, no summary judgements. It felt unreal. Enough that for a second, she question whether this was really Hannah Shepard.

But she needed it so much she didn’t really care.

They were way past Hannah’s allotment of minutes for the month; some comm officer knew what this conversation was, and by morning, likely so would her entire ship. Fuck it. “I don’t know what to do. I’m so lost.”

Her mother scoffed. “You’re not lost.”

That, at least, was more like the mother Shepard remembered. And she was ready for some normalization. “Sure.”

But then Hannah surprised her. “Nathaly Zelena Shepard. You have that ridiculous name because your grandmother was the only one who welcomed me the whole first year I dated your father. You took your first step in our living room, when your father thought you were asleep, because you saw him talking to me on vid comm and didn’t realize yet that I wasn’t really there.”

Hannah took a breath, and carried on. “You got into your first fight when you were four. Some other little girl wouldn’t take turns. The preschool called me, and I found you bloody-nosed and beaming from your win. I lost count of the number of times we repeated that scene.”

“My temper drove you crazy.” It brought a lot of memories, of shouting matches and passive-aggressive avoidance. But just now it also made her warm. Maybe it wasn’t all good, but it was their history, mother and daughter, stubborn to the last.

“It wasn’t your temper. It was the way you never stopped trying to fight off the whole damn world.” Then her voice softened, growing a touch fonder. “You’ll find your way. You always do.

“How do you know?” The question emerged without any conscious intention. Bursting forth before she could stop it.
Her mother only laughed. “Because I know you, Nathaly. And you know you, too. You’ll remember sooner or later and then this will all seem much easier. I promise.”

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Late that night, Shepard made her way back to the Normandy’s berth. She’d washed her face in a public restroom, grateful for a small moment that her mother could not see her hair when they spoke. Then she found an express elevator and retreated to a plaza high enough to feel the cool air available on Illium only at altitude. Feeling so clean and empty that she was lightheaded. Like she’d run a fever for weeks, filling her with fog and death, that finally broke and left her so much better.

She ate something, sitting there in that exclusive park, while the wealthy residents glared at her askance. Nobody came to remove her. Maybe she looked that unhinged, or tired. For her own part, she couldn’t say. Never in her life had she broken down like that. The mere thought of it always seemed brittle. Never once did she suspect it could heal instead of shatter.

Shepard stayed on that bench until the stars came out and she started to shiver. Not thinking of much at all; just basking in relief of finally, finally feeling something other than a wound gone bad. The knot in her stomach had grown so large without her ever realizing, and now its sudden absence was heaven itself.

Her thoughts so quiet, in fact, that when she arrived back at the Normandy, she was actually started to see Liara pacing outside the docking tube. Shepard stopped several meters back and crossed her arms. Waiting.

Liara swallowed, once. “I hoped you might let me explain.”

“I don’t care.” Said without malice, or rancor of any kind. A simple fact. Shepard did not care. No justification made up for giving her into Cerberus’ hands, defenseless and alone. And she did not want to hash it out.

“That wasn’t a decision made lightly.”

That was funny. “For crying out loud, Liara. You knew what Cerberus did to me on Akuze. You knew what they were going to do to me in that lab, and that I didn’t want it. And I know you knew because I said it to your face when we found that poor girl and her boyfriend aboard the derelict hauler. The only thing I’m interested in hearing from you is a wholehearted apology.”

They stared at each other for a minute, and then another. Shepard unfolded her arms and walked towards her ship. “That’s okay. Feel free to hit me up when you’re ready.”

As she tagged the hatch, Liara burst out, “I’m sorry.”

Shepard paused, looking over her shoulder. Liara was distraught. Twisting her hands together like her fingers might break off. “You’re right. I gave you to Cerberus, fully aware of their plans. The only other option was the Shadow Broker, who would have given you over to the attentions of the Collectors.”

“There was a third option.” Quietly. “Cremation. Burial. You could have let me go. I’d already been gone some time. It was only the last step.”

Her face fell further. “Surely you don’t mean that. Surely you wouldn’t rather…”

And she broke off, physically unable to say it. Shepard glanced away. “We all die sometime.”
Liara’s breath came in a hiccup. She realized abruptly that she was crying. Her brow furrowed.

Liara drew herself up. Silent tears trickling down her face. “I missed you so much.”

Shepard watched her a little longer. Then she sighed, and opened the hatch. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. 1030 outside the Baria Frontiers headquarters.”

She blinked. “What?”

“I already said I’d help you, and I will. Because we’re friends.” She blew out a breath. “But I’m going to be mad about this for a long time. And you’re going to have to learn to respect that better than you have any of my other feelings, or I’m not sure how much longer that’s going to be true.”

“Tomorrow, then.” Liara sounded like she didn’t trust herself to say more.

Shepard gave her a nod, and left her on the dock.
The Old Flame

September 2185

Shepard arrived early, after enjoying a leisurely drive to Baria Frontiers, a skyscraper in one of the newer districts of the arcology comprising Nos Astra. They did a lot of business in the Terminus, and this was their center of operations for such work. Wispy low-lying clouds pillowed around the landing platform in sunlit eddies, gathering thicker where skybridges led to other platforms and boiling over onto the pavement.

This was a bit later than she liked to start her day, but she knew better than to expect anything good from Nehal first thing in the morning. Six years wasn’t nearly long enough to change that habit.

But as she stepped out onto the walk, a brewing argument on the steps marred the peaceful vista. Their voices carried across the small plaza, one of them oddly familiar. She squinted against the sun. Sure enough, she had Shiala’s unique pigmentation, still green as the thorian left her.

At that moment, the second asari gave up, turning back into the building, and Shiala looked her way. As surprised as Shepard, but she wasted no time coming over, her welcoming smile only a little strained. “Commander Shepard. It’s good to see you again.”

Shepard offered her a handshake. “I thought you planned to stay on Feros.”

“I did,” she said, accepting with a grip as firm and sure as expected of a former commando. “I’m here on their behalf. Some of the infected colonists are showing unusual medical symptoms. Headaches, muscle spasms, flashbacks and fever dreams of thorian control.” A wry smile. “Ongoing pigmentation alteration, in one case.”

It wasn’t hard to guess the rest. “You hired Baria Frontiers to evaluate their condition.”

“One of their subsidiaries, but yes.” Her voice turned clipped. “Their contract was over a hundred pages long. We reviewed it as best we could, but missed a very tangled clause giving them permission to perform invasive procedures without consent.”

“I guess there’s such a thing as too affordable.” But her blood temperature rose a few degrees.

Shiala winced in agreement. “Unfortunately, price was a consideration. But we never intended to agree to this.”

“I’ve got some business with Baria Frontiers today myself. Let me see what I can do.”

“I can’t ask that. Not after all you’ve already done for Zhu’s Hope.”

She just laughed. “I didn’t risk my ass saving your colony to let it go down to a bunch of lawyers.”

“You’ve worked miracles for us before. Anything you can do is appreciated.” She gave her a nod. “Excuse me, but I need to report my progress… or lack thereof.”

Shepard watched her leave, opening her omni-tool and heading for the taxi stand, just as another cab landed and Liara stepped out. She blinked as Shiala walked by. Shepard waved her over.

Liara continued staring after her as she departed. “Was that..?”

“Yeah. Turns out Feros is getting a little screwed.”
“Not for long, I imagine, if you’re involved now.” Liara offered her a smile.

Shepard soured. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“I don’t want your flattery.” Her mouth pressed into a line. “We’re here to find a connection to the Shadow Broker. That’s it.”

Liara pursed her lips, but restrained herself. Instead she looked up the length of the building. “Impressive.”

“They rent out a number of the middle floors.” Shepard wasn’t sure why she felt the need to say that. “We should go see the receptionist, and have her call up.”

“Indeed.” She gestured. “Shall we?”

“If we must.” They walked inside.

The lobby was a vast and sparkling-clean expanse of white marble, scattered with a handful of chairs and plants, drawing the eye to a single massive square desk at the end of the room. The visitors were mainly asari, as one would expect; but the receptionist was human, a smartly dressed blonde man, sizing them up as they came through the door.

Liara met with expectations. Shepard drew a small frown of concern, one that smoothed only slightly as they approached. “Good afternoon, ma’am. Welcome to Baria Frontiers.”

That frown turned to momentary shock, swiftly concealed, when Liara looked over at Shepard. She stepped forward, jeans, t-shirt, scars, hair, and all. Hardly the portrait of a businesswoman. “Nathaly Shepard and guest, here to see Ms. Nagarajan.”

Shock became amusement. “Ma’am, I’m afraid Vice President Nagarajan is not available. I can take a message.”

One that would certainly be deleted before their boots left the building. Shepard smiled, more like a shark. “Do me a favor. Call up Charana, see if she’s got a few minutes free for me.”

He sniffed. “Charana T’Mesa is no longer employed here.”

“I don’t believe you.” She watched him steadily. “Nehal met her in college. They’re thick as thieves, in and out of the office. And I’m asking you to call her up.”

His jaw twitched, and she knew she had him. He activated the comm pod on his desk and reached for his headset. Shepard overheard Charana pick up, sounding distracted—funny how she could recall her voice after all this time. “Hello, yes, what?”

“I have two… guests in the lobby,” he replied, stiffly. “One of them claims to be a friend of Ms. Nagarajan. I’ve explained this is most irregular—”

Shepard leaned over the desk and activated the speaker function. “Charana, it’s me. Nathaly. Can I come up? If Nehal’s busy, I can wait.”

There was an extended pause. Then her voice exploded, ebullient. “Nathaly? Goddess! Really? Nehal will be thrilled to see you.”

That made her blink, because she doubted very much that Nehal ever wanted to see her again, and
came here on a long shot. “That’s… nice.”

“Yes, come right up. Dieter, buzz them in.”

The call disconnected. Dieter gave her a very sour look. “Please take the express elevator on your right to the executive floor, just below the observation lounge.”

She answered it with smug sweetness. “Thanks. You’ve been so helpful.”

Liara hid a smile as they boarded the elevator and hit the button. “It’s reassuring to see how little you’ve changed.”

That killed off her satisfaction. She scuffled at the floor with her shoe, as they began to rise. “I’m surprised, actually. I wasn’t sure… Well, Nehal has a temper as bad as mine and she’s never buried a hatchet in her life.”

Liara glanced at Shepard sidelong. “How long has it been since you saw each other?”

“Four— I mean, six years.” She crossed her arms, sat back on her heel, and watched the numbers blink as they passed each floor.

“I take it you parted on bad terms?”

“You could say that.” She could still feel the hatch sliding aside, seeing Nehal in the hospital bed and Nehal’s mother beside her. I sent you flowers, she’d said. Nehal reaching for the vase and hurling it as hard as she could, hard enough to tear out four stitches, smashing against the wall and showering Shepard in water, glass, and petals. Here’s your goddamn flowers.

When no further explanation was forthcoming, Liara tried again. “Back on the SR-1, Ash told me that you’d been engaged to someone else once. Surely this ending couldn’t be any worse than that.”

“By the time I met Nehal, neither of us believed in marriage, but…” She ran her hand over her hair. “Look, we didn’t break up. We just… broke.”

Liara hesitated. “If you’d rather not do this, I can cultivate other sources.”

“Too late now.” Harsher, perhaps, than even Liara deserved just now. Her betrayal had nothing to do with how antsy she was in anticipation of this meeting. She softened ever so slightly. “We’ve all got one we can’t talk about.”

Liara hit the stop button. The elevator ground to a halt. “Shepard, what happened?”

Shepard bristled and reached for the button. Liara had seen the doors in her head, when they melded their minds, the ones chained shut. She should know better. “None of your damn business.”

Liara covered it with her hand before she could restart the elevator. “I am sorrier than I can say for how my actions have affected you.”

Not, Shepard noted, sorry at all for having taken those actions. She crossed her arms. Liara took a breath and continued. “But this isn’t about our friendship. I owe a debt I can’t repay without this information. You may not realize, but it’s your debt, too. Feron was essential in recovering your body. You owe him your life, whether or not you wanted it. And I don’t think that’s something you can let go.”
Her eyes flashed. “I should tell you to go to hell.”

“I don’t believe in hell,” she shot back.

A startled moment passed. Then Shepard chuckled despite herself. It wasn’t funny, exactly. Liara had always been relentless; it seemed two years as an infobroker had taken off the gloves.

Liara risked a tiny smile, uncertain, fleeting, and dialed back a notch. “I don’t mean to pry. But this is... very important. The Shadow Broker has him, and the Broker isn’t known for his hospitality.”

“He’s probably dead.”

“I’m aware.”

Shepard licked her lips and looked away. And then she told the part she could talk about, to satisfy Liara’s frankly legitimate concern, and because it was a relief to get some of it out before she had to actually speak to Nehal. “She was coming home late from a party. There was a sky car crash. Nehal suffered serious injury to her hip and spine, and had a great deal of internal bleeding, and... you get the picture.”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your fault.”

“I was training,” she said, flatly. “Dress rehearsal for a Hegemony op that never materialized, because the batarians killed the three marines they captured before we could go. Strictly no comms. My C.O. didn’t tell me about the accident until after we were released. I got to Illium as quickly as I could, but by then it was five days later, and she was... upset.”

“Surely she couldn’t hold that against you. She knew your job required special attention.”

“The job always comes first.” Shepard hit the button to restart the elevator. “That’s why I’m not cut out to be a partner. Not in the long run.”

“Surely you can’t believe that.”

She tried not to, most of the time. But deep down it always rang like truth. “Yeah.”

The ascended in silence. Then, for completeness’ sake, and to prepare Liara if this all went sideways, she added, “I said some things, the last time I saw her. Stuff that’s pretty hard to take back.”

Before Liara could respond, the doors opened. An asari rushed out from behind the desk and seized her hand in both her own. “Nathaly!”

“Charana.” She carefully extracted her hand and gave her a quick hug. “I’m surprised you let me in.”

She waved that off as patently ridiculous. “You’re always welcome here, you know that.”

A lie. But a kind one. Charana let her go and moved towards the door, leading into Nehal’s office. “You know, I half-expected you were here to chide us about that mess with NEF.”

“What mess with NEF?” The Naval Exploration Flotilla necessarily had a relationship with corporations like Baria Frontiers, as part of its larger mission to survey the galaxy. But she hadn’t seen any news.
Charana stopped short, blinking. This from a woman who never stopped moving. “You haven’t heard?”

“I’ve been dead,” she said bluntly, without thinking. Then a weirdness stole over her, realizing this was the exact moment when that became normal to her.

“Yes,” she faltered. “Whatever deep undercover thing the spectres had you up to… Well. It’s been a disaster with NEF, truly. We bought some geological surveys from them, standard business, and now the Alliance is claiming they had no authorization to sell and the profits were embezzled. They’re painting us as colluders.”

That explained Nehal’s willingness to meet. Something like that amounted to a real PR catastrophe. “Thanks for warning me.”

Charana flashed her a smile and tagged the hatch. “Please, go in. Nehal’s got a gap in her schedule just now. You shouldn’t be interrupted.”

With a sense of foreboding, Shepard moved into the room. Yelling, arguing, a good solid slap—nothing would surprise her. She braced herself.

Nehal was just getting out of her chair. She might have still been twenty-five, expensive suit fitted like she was born wearing it, thick black hair cascading to her waist with no need for any adornment whatsoever, and those wide, vividly dark eyes that seemed unique to the Indian subcontinent. She glanced up as they came in.

Shepard stood awkward as a girl, fidgeting with her hands. There had been no closure whatsoever, mostly her fault, but she found now some part of her still yearned for it. “Hello.”

There was moment when it could have gone any way at all. Then Nehal’s face split into a genuine smile, and she walked up and put her arms around Shepard. “It’s good to see you.”

A second passed before she recovered herself enough to return it. Turned out she could be surprised, after all. Not the least because the hug put her back all those years ago, and for a moment, it seemed like no time had passed. Confusing and aching and infuriating, churning together.

She managed to speak around her dry mouth. “This is unexpected.”

“I think that’s my line.” She drew back.

Shepard blinked at the red sindoor prominent in the part of her hair. “You got married?”

“She told me that shacking up was for children, and insisted.” Nehal sighed, but to those who knew her, it was all affection. “Please, come in.”

They settled themselves in her sitting area, overlooking the Illium skyline, Shepard still full of trepidation over the unexpected warm welcome, still feeling the phantom pressure of her body pushing against her, familiar and strange all at once. Nehal crossed her legs at the knee. “So, are you going to introduce me?”

“Oh. Right.” Shepard gave herself a shake, and looked to her left. “This is Dr. Liara T’Soni. She’s actually why we’re here.”

She cocked her head. “Liara T’Soni. I’ve heard that name before.”
Liara straightened. “I’ve met with representatives of Baria Frontiers several times, after they solicited my information services.”

“The infobroker, yes.” Nehal sat back. “My staff says you’re very good. Nathaly always did have a taste for talented people.”

Liara shifted in her seat. Nehal sat back with a chuckle. “I’ll bet she still won’t sleep in a bed, either. Always winds up on the couch. This one night, a window broke. The frame wasn’t made for this altitude. But we didn’t know that at first. Nathaly stalked through the entire apartment in her underwear, clearing each room. I didn’t even realize she’d brought a gun.”

That was blunt subtext, because at the time, the incident was nowhere near as cute as Nehal like to tell it after. Shepard was convinced someone had broken in. Nehal was freaking out, less over the window and more over seeing Shepard in “commando mode”, as she called it. A hard and focused side Shepard mostly kept separate from her lovers.

But before she could explore that, Liara delicately cleared her throat. “I’m afraid there’s been a mistake. We’re not together.”

Oh. Oh…. Blood rushed to Shepard’s face. “I didn’t— you thought we—”

And Nehal was trying to warn her: Nathaly is difficult to live with. So not everything was in the past after all.

Nehal sat up, flustered. And wasn’t that a distraction, seeing her caught off-guard and momentarily unpolished, a look Shepard had always enjoyed. A bit primly, she said. “I’d hoped.”

Shepard stammered. “It’s nothing like that.”

“My apologies,” Nehal said, smoothing her jacket, a cover for her embarrassment. “I just assumed… Well, it would take something extraordinary to get Nathaly to stop in after years of utter silence.”

More than a hint of accusation there, but buried. Impolite to mention that it might still smart. Maybe wanting closure, too.

Shepard pursed her lips. And said, quite spontaneously and without any conscious thought whatsoever, “I’m sorry.”

Nehal furrowed her brow. “I don’t follow…”

She cleared her throat, and tried again. “I’m sorry, for what I said, at lunch that last time. That accusation. I wish I could say I regretted it immediately, but… It’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to me, and I was… not myself.”

Nehal stared at her. Then she looked away and bit her lip. “Amazing. I thought I’d stopped needing to hear that a year after you left.”

“I wish I’d taken some of your calls.” But they both knew that was how she coped, isolating herself, forcefully if necessary. Hell, she’d been doing the same damn thing since Lazarus, with everyone important. Nothing ever changed.

Nehal scoffed. “You pack up everything you don’t want into boxes, in your head. Compartmentalize it all away until it’s like it never happened for you. And you don’t like reminders of what’s in the attic.”
She shifted in her seat. Reminded again of those long hallways of her mental headspace, door after locked door, cabinets without pulls. “Maybe I did need space, but it wasn’t fair to just disappear.”

“No, it wasn’t.” She took a breath, and sat up, briskly. “Well. Why are you here?”

Shepard looked away, out over that magnificent and deliriously expensive skyline, composing herself. Not sure what she’d expected, but whatever she’d needed in response, this wasn’t it. There wasn’t any lingering love or even pain. She’d just worked so hard to put Nehal out of her mind that the end of it was left jagged.

But at the end of the day, Nehal was Nehal, and she was still Nathaly. “You’ve heard about the Collector attacks on the colonies?”

“Oh course. We’ve taken significant losses over the past two years in our Terminus division.” Anyone who didn’t know Nehal might think that was excessively cold. But really, she was just focused. Shepard got a fair amount of that kind of accusation in her line of work herself.

“I spent the past two years in a medical coma, in the care of a specialized organization.” True enough, without getting sidetracked by the details of her resurrection. Right now, she just wanted to get through this as quickly as possible. Do her business and leave. “We don’t see eye-to-eye on much, but they tasked me with ending the assaults, and I came to Illium looking for intelligence.”

Nehal’s gaze slid to Liara, who cleared her throat, delicately. “We know that the Shadow Broker has dealt with the Collectors before. It’s possible one of his agents might be able to provide what we need to stop these attacks.”

Shepard started at that “we”, but didn’t question it. Nehal shook her head. “Not that I don’t agree, but I don’t see how I can help.”

“An agent is sending coded messages through stock trades,” Shepard said. “You could give us access to your Hallaria Terminal. Liara can analyze the data and uncover their identity.”

Nehal sat back, her mouth twitching. “Is that all?”

Liara straightened. “I understand it’s a terribly expensive system—”

“That’s all,” Shepard said, interrupting. She could read Nehal better. Nehal was definitely amused. “And you know you can justify it because solving this crisis protects your bottom line.”

“And for the low, low cost of a few weeks of extra therapy when my lead analyst has a nervous attack from someone else touching her equipment.” Nehal smiled. “Sold. Charana will set you up.”

She got up and went back to her desk. Liara stammered. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Nehal shrugged. “It’s a monthly fee. We pay for the system regardless of how much it’s used, or by whom. You’ll only have read privileges, of course. And you’ll have to do your work on-site.”

She activated her intercom, and explained their needs in brief to her assistant. Who seemed just as relieved as Nathaly that this meeting had not ended in an explosion. Liara shook her hand as they made to leave. “Truly, I can’t thank you enough.”

That was unusual for her, to be so unreserved with a stranger. It said whoever her missing friend was, the guilt was killing her.
Then Shepard cleared her throat. “There was one other thing.”

“You have some nerve.” But her mouth quirked.

She cocked her head. “You know, I half-expected you to throw me out.”

“I would’ve, once.” Nehal folded her arms. “A year or more after… after, my mother took me on
a retreat to Nelenaia, on Themaris, and she said I needed to stay until I let it go. What happened
wasn’t your fault, and you were long gone, and it was poisoning me.”

Shepard blinked. “Your mom hated me.”

“She didn’t like your job and she wished you were Hindu.” She shrugged. “Standard mother-in-
law stuff, if you ask me. Shall we discuss your mother’s faults?”

The first time they met, Nehal excused herself to the restroom. Hannah leveled a look at her
daughter across the restaurant table, eyebrow arched, and asked dryly, Her? Shepard cleared her
throat. “No.”

“Then what did you need?”

She got partway through explaining the issue with Zhu’s Hope when Nehal began waving her off.
“Oh, Baria Medical. That asari boils my blood.”

“How do me?”

“The director. She never misses a chance to put the screws to aliens. Unresolved issues from
losing her daughters during the Battle of the Citadel.” She shook her head. “Have your friend send
her contract to Charana, and she’ll get this bullshit sorted out. Really, I should set up a help desk,
this happens that often. Some kind of sorry our director is a lemon-bit witch ticketing system.”

Shepard burst out laughing. That was Nehal up and down. All exasperation. For all the harm
they’d done each other, Shepard couldn’t say she never liked her.

Liara glanced at them askance. “Why not dismiss her?”

“Because she knows Illium law backwards and forwards, and that’s invaluable to my business,”
Nehal said. “And because she knows Illium law, I’m not certain we’d still have a business after
she got done suing us for wrongful termination and who knows what else.”

“Fair enough.” Shepard didn’t want another hug, and Nehal didn’t seem inclined to attempt one.
Likely that gesture at the door was merely impulsive, like the bad jokes. “Thank you. It was good
to see you again.”

“Likewise.” Then, when they were halfway out the door, “Nathaly.”

She turned, brow furrowed. Nehal lifted her chin and looked at her directly. “I want you to know,
I forgave you. Not immediately, not even soon, but eventually. You didn’t say it to hurt me. You
just wanted something to blame, like I did. I chose your job. You chose my vices.”

And Shepard stood nailed to the floor. Because that was it, the precise thing she hoped to hear
when she told Liara they could come to this office and try, only just now realized.

“And I also want you to know, I forgave you for myself.” Nehal folded her hands in front of her.
“Grief is awful. We were never good at awful.”
“No, we weren’t,” she said. “Be well, Nehal.”

Her mouth moved, a grim little smile, but not bitter. Shepard nodded. Then Charana walked them the elevator, and the doors closed off the sight of Nehal.

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The remainder of the day offered little distraction, as Liara combed through the trade data and Shepard twiddled her thumbs. There were two types of transactions. First, legitimate ones, five agents funneling money to a sixth Liara had yet to identify. Then the others, orders that mathematically could not execute, transmitting information in the type and number of shares, and the type of order. Those latter ones were coded, while the former paid for the intel.

But the fishing expedition took a disturbing turn sometime after dinner, after most of Baria’s staff had gone home. They sat munching vending machine sandwiches in the terminal glow.

Shepard wiped her mouth. “So you’re telling me your VI program started figuring out what these coded transactions are saying?”

“It’s not quite that straightforward, but yes.” She took a sip from her bottle water and leaned forward. “It seems the sixth buyer was watching all the others. Directing the flow.”

“An observer?”

“Exactly.” Liara shook her head. “I assumed it had to be one of the five, using another profile. But the more I look at this, the less sense it makes. This… observer would have awareness of all these transactions. But there’s no evidence any of these five have that sort of insight.”

“And nobody’s that good a front. Not over hundreds of trades.” Shepard took another bite. “Shit, I’ve missed Thessian tomatoes.”

That earned her an eye-roll. “They’re not tomatoes—”

“They’re red and slightly sweet and have that kind of earthy back-taste.”

“You’re fluent in Vinassi. How is it you can’t remember the proper names for plants?”

She licked a bit of not-tomato juice off her thumb. “It’s more fun to call them tomatoes.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She sighed. “At least I don’t have to fret over whether Cerberus gave your face to someone else.”

It slipped out. Liara quieted, her sidelong glance anxious. Shepard chose to ignore it. In truth, Liara didn’t deserve to have her guilt dignified by Shepard’s constant flagellation. She refused to take care of her that way. Instead, she gestured at the screen. “Where the hell did you get this tip, anyway? Feels like a wild goose chase.”

“Nyzeris,” she answered, absently. Then she glanced at Shepard. “What did your ex-girlfriend mean, ‘you were both grieving’?”

“The relationship,” Shepard replied, after a pause, jarred by the change in topic. She’d been trying to avoid thinking about the conversation. Years of practice made it easier. “What were you planning to do once you found this operative? Before I got here? I’m guessing not ask a few polite questions.”
“I…” She sat back and looked at her directly. “I will find the Broker, and his base, wherever that might be. And no. I did not expect asking politely to yield results.”

“The Broker tried to buy my corpse, on the behalf of the Collectors. Who are now terrorizing human colonies.” Shepard shook her head. “I have a few questions for him myself.”

“Then we’re agreed. We find this person, and then we do our best to squeeze out every drop of intel they have on the Shadow Broker.”

Shepard started. Liara never looked so intense. Or intimidating. “What the hell happened with your friend?”

Liara pursed her lips and went back to perusing the terminal.

After another few minutes, and polishing off her sandwich, Shepard reached her limit for watching her type queries. “You know, maybe your assistant could help. If she dug up these sources, she’s at least familiar with them, maybe more than we are.”

“I don’t think…” She trailed off and went still a long moment, staring into the middle distance. “I… didn’t think. Nyxeris brought me this information.”

Shepard’s brow furrowed. Liara sat up straight, starting a new query, one that didn’t seem part of the standard terminal UI. “Hey, Liara. Messing around is one thing, but on the whole, I’d rather not set off alarms in this particular system. I came here on thin ice with Nehal and if we trigger an investigation with the local version of the SEC—”

“I’m not going to get caught.” A tremendous amount of confidence there, more than Shepard expected from Liara on a matter of tech. “The network address of the Observer’s trades. It’s coming from my office.”

“Your office?” Then the shoe dropped. “Your assistant was stupid enough to run a Shadow Broker op out of her desk?”

“It appears so. To her credit, I was stupid enough not to notice.” Liara logged off. “Thank you, Shepard. I’m… going to have a word with Nyxeris.”

“Or three,” she said, dryly. “Sure you don’t want a hand?”

“No thank you. I’m looking forward to this.” And seeing the grim look on her face, Shepard was glad not to be Nyxeris. Then Liara stood, stretching. “You’ve sat here with me half the evening. At least let me put you up.”

“That’s really not necessary—”

“I insist.” A fleeting smile. “Or has resurrection changed your opinion on bathtubs?”

It had not. Shepard acquiesced, anger or no, obvious bribe or not. “Okay.”

“It’s nothing. I only wish… Well, that I could have done more. While…”

“I understand.” She had no desire to re-open that discussion. “Let’s grab a taxi and get out of here.”

\\ Liara put her up in a high-end room at the Eternity Hotel, larger than the one on Noveria but as
well-appointed, and with far fewer electronic bugs hidden on the premises. And the bar downstairs looked extremely promising.

But she found herself pacing rather than entertaining herself, or sleeping for that matter. Still mulling over the meeting with Nehal. Seeing her again so many years later felt strange. The warm reception even stranger. Like Nehal actually got over it, and as Nathaly was beginning to realize after everything Cerberus put her through, she herself never got over anything. Every last experience hung around her neck, weighing her down until the end of time.

But more than that, it suggested that maybe the relationship had been salvageable after all. If she hadn’t been such a wounded animal. If she’d apologized, or even just replied to one of the emails or calls. If she hadn’t insisted on severing ties and enduring alone, maybe the years leading up to her death would’ve been different. Less lonely. A hell of a lot less bleak.

Or maybe it would’ve all fallen apart anyway, when she met Kaidan, because as much as she and Nehal had once loved each other, it had never been easy, and in ’83 it had all felt just effortless. Shepard snorted. The situation with Kaidan now was anything but easy.

But she also remembered him finding her in the shuttle bay, after Ash’s death. Hunching up and just sitting with her, in that pain. Actually working through something rather than moving past it or ignoring it. And that was maybe the only one she’d made any progress putting behind her. Sure, there was little alternative under the circumstances back then, but it remained a significant outlier.

*I’m not with Liara,* she’d said. *I’d hoped,* Nehal replied. Once, at that particularly spiteful lunch, she’d called Shepard the loneliest person she’d ever known. And it was only occurring to her now, six years later, that Nehal might have scheduled that date as a last-ditch attempt to reconcile.

Which meant reconciliation had been possible. If that was on the table with Nehal, who was as unreasonable as Shepard herself, it had to be on Kaidan’s table, too.

And god, did she want to fix this. If someone granted her just one piece of her old life back, she’d pick him, without a second of consideration or doubt.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Shepard went to the desk, and connected the hotel room’s comm pod to her omni-tool. Direct calls would route through the *Normandy,* and she wanted this one off-logs.

Forty thousand light years was a lot of comm buoys and hand-offs. Shepard waited. Ten minutes later, a too-familiar voice purred sleepily in her ear. “Hello?”

She shut her eyes. “Hey. It’s me.”

An even longer pause on the other end. “Hi, you.”

Her chuckle came as a small burst, nerves and relief, because he didn’t sound mad at all. Nervous himself, sure. But not even a little irritated. “Can we talk?”

Another hesitation, a different color than before. She could picture his eyebrows bunching together. Heard him sit down, the faint squeak of an easy chair or a mattress. “I found your recording—”

“No,” she interrupted. “Not— not that. I don’t want to talk about the fight. I’m not ready to dig into it, and it’s been a really long few days. I just…” She swallowed. “I wanted to hear your
voice. Can we just talk?"

Meaning: *Can we pretend? Just for now, that everything is ok, so I can believe it will be someday?*

“Sure,” he said, after a moment. “What about, then?”

“I don’t know.” Feeling herself at a loss for topics, wondering if calling was a mistake after all.

Then Kaidan cleared his throat. “What kind of snakes are found on cars?” He waited a beat.

“Windshield vipers.”

It was such a non sequitur that her laugh came out full and real this time. “What?”

“Nothing. Something I got off a pizza box.” Just the smallest catch in his voice. “I don’t know if that’s you, or somebody else, but I’ll give Cerberus some credit. They got your laugh spot-on.”

She slid to the floor and sat with her back against the desk. Closed her eyes. “Two muffins are in an oven. One says it’s hot in here—”

“—and the other says, holy crap, a talking muffin.” His chuckle warm and familiar. “That’s a really old one.”

Her turn to pause. “Liara’s here. On Illium. She… told me about your visit to Lazarus.”

This time the silence stretched and stretched. “Kaidan? Are you there?”

“Yeah,” he said, distantly. “She told you?”

Shepard thought about them digging through the wreckage of the station. Looking for her corpse, again, or evidence just as painful. “I can’t imagine what that was like. I wish you’d told me on Horizon.”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d react.” The springs squeaked again, as he shifted his weight. “And honestly, I was pre-occupied with…”

“Being a jackass?” she suggested brightly.

Another chuckle. It felt so good to hear it. But… “Kaidan, I don’t know what happened to me. Maybe you’re right, and maybe my whole existence right now is some kind of machine hallucination, or who the hell knows what else. But if I think about it too long I feel like I’m coming apart.”

“Yeah. It’s gotta be one hell of a head trip.” A sigh. “Look, I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t have made it worse for you.”

“You were right about a lot of things,” she said. “Cerberus did have a guy on the ground. I waited near the relay until he got picked up by another cell, to confirm it.”

“Shit. I didn’t want to be right about this.”

Shepard rolled her eyes. “Yes, you did.”

Kaidan let out a breath. “Yes, I did, but not for good reasons.”

“So.” She swallowed. He knew her better than anyone ever had. “Who’s to say you’re not right about what Cerberus did to me, too?”
That hung in the air long enough for her to wonder if the call dropped out. “Kaidan?”

“I’m here.” He picked through his words carefully. “Nathaly, why are you with them? I don’t understand. Help me out.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I am, anymore.” Her throat burning, a visceral recollection of screaming at Jack Harper. “Cerberus lured the Collectors to Horizon. They wanted an attack they could study, and your guy on the ground was probably part of that.”

He swore again. “We found evidence Cerberus and the Collectors were cutting deals. But this…”

“I don’t think it was like that.” She took a deep breath. “They used you as bait. The Collectors want me and I want you, and the Illusive Man made sure they knew that.” And into the silence that followed, “He leaked rumors. Enough to attract their attention. Or so he told me.”

“And you believe—”

“Yes.” Simply, no effort to disguise the horror of it.

“I…” His voice breaking. “God, Nathaly, all those people—”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, instantly, with every ounce of ironclad conviction she had. “It’s his fault. I told him so. And then I came to Illium, looking for some new sources.”

“But you’re still on his ship. Using his resources.” No question in his tone.

“He wants them back, he can damn well try to take them.” Then the ferocity dropped off her. She put her forehead in her hand. “He told me you were on Horizon, when he told me it was under attack. I was so scared, Kaidan. I’ve never been that scared in my life.”

“Hey,” he said, sounding more like himself than he had at any point during this conversation. “It’s okay. Nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened—”

“You know what I mean.” A rustling, like he was laying down. He sat on the bed, then. “Ugh.”

“Your shoulder still bothering you?”

“I basically got stabbed by a reaper wasp, so yes. But it’s getting better.” Another pause, but this one less full of trepidation, and more like gathering thoughts. “On Alchera, I walked out to Shuttle One and opened up that hatch, and saw Joker there without you, and the world ended at that moment. Like everything that’s happened after is a warped mirror.”

“I’m sorry.” And though she thought it a thousand times, frantic and guilty and full of pain, it felt different now. Regret, but not desperate to make it up to him. “I never meant to leave you like that. There was another attack, straight down into the battery, and I never would’ve made it to the shuttle before it blew.”

“I know.”

“But I did linger, going to get Joker.” Her voice breaking. “I don’t know why I did that.”

“I know,” he said again, more gently. “I’m worried sick about you. Alone out there with Cerberus.”
Shepard wiped at her nose. “I’m not completely alone. Even if it feels like it sometimes.”

The silence stretched a few moments. Then he said, “Why can’t your nose be twelve inches long?”

She let out a tired chuckle. “Kaidan…”

“What? You said you didn’t want to talk about this.” Teasing her. Amazing how great that felt. “Come on.”

“I don’t know,” Shepard said, playing along. “Why can’t a nose be twelve inches long?”

His voice swelled with pride. “Because then it would be a foot.”

She groaned. “That was awful.”

“You think you can do worse?”

And that got a genuine smile. “You’re on.”

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